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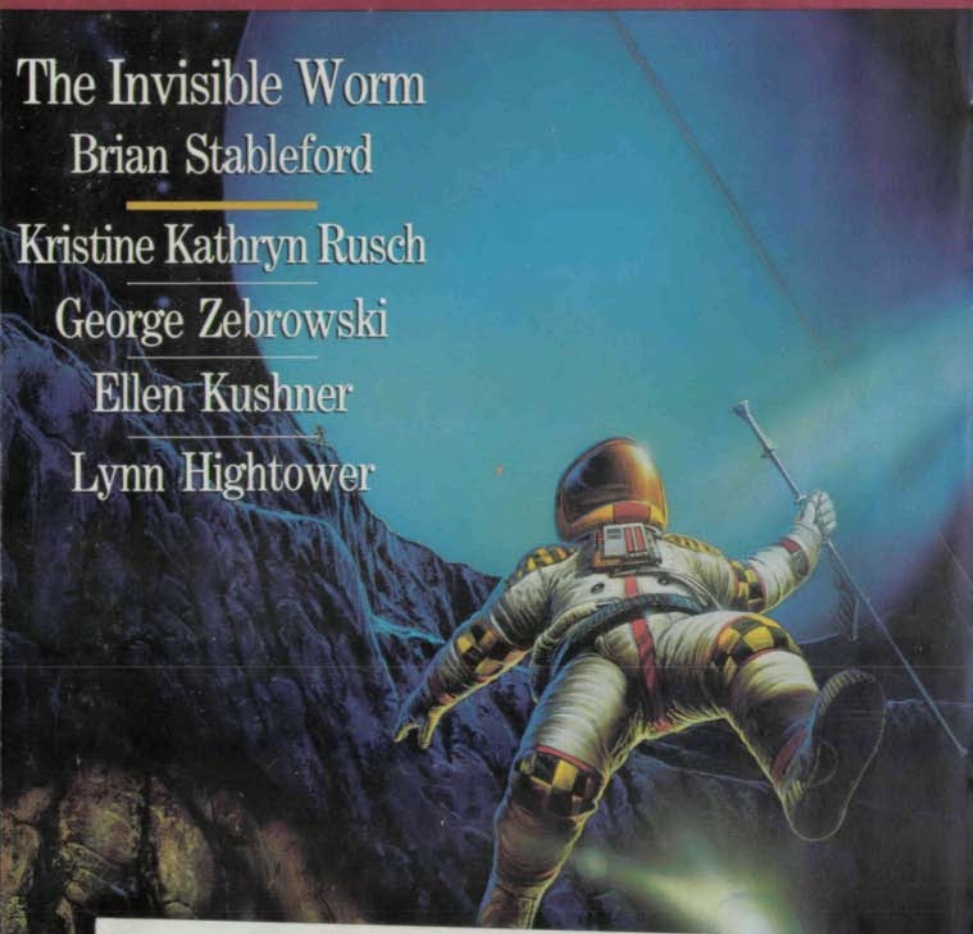

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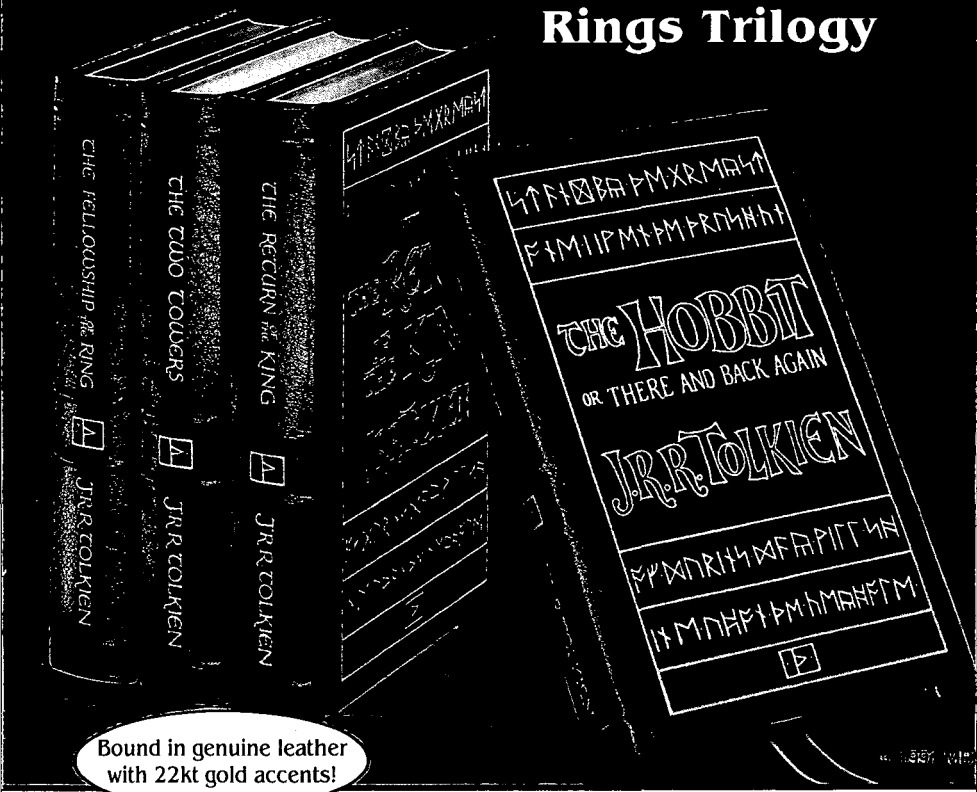

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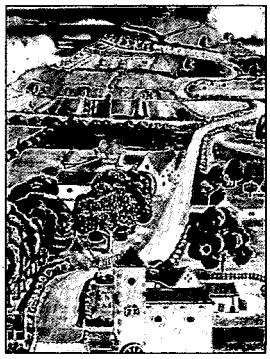

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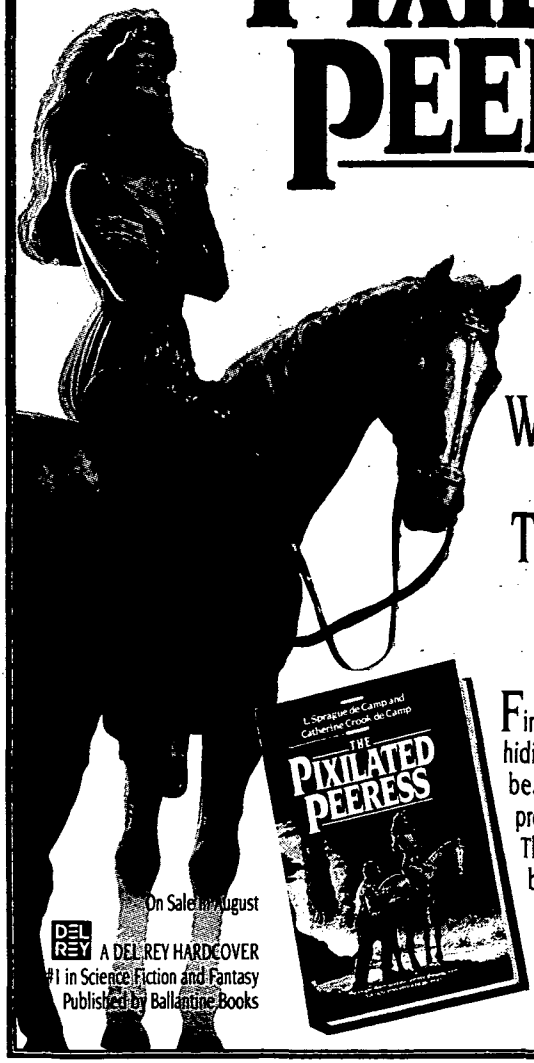

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SEPTEMBER • 42nd Year of Publication

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THEORIES OF childhood rise and fall like empires. Historians have started to chronicle theories of childhood with the same intensity they used to have when chronicling the aristocracy. Lawrence Stone, in his excellent book, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800,* examines the way that theories changed. Children went from being wild creatures that needed taming through corporal punishment and cool detachment to being objects of affection treated with intelligence and respect. By the beginning of the 19th century, children had actually been recognized as human beings.

Such a change seems odd to us now. We know that children are human beings. But we have had such discussions in our century too. *The New York Times* ran an article just this year about the ways that the family is changing. We've been too permissive with our children, the *Times* experts said. We must return to an age where children learn discipline and the importance of family.

The *Times* isn't the only organization with an opinion about child-rearing and childhood. Stop any person on the street and ask about children. Most people will give a very heated response.

"I think we have a right to comment on the way other people treat their children," said a childless woman I had dinner with last week. "After all, we were children too."

But were we? In our memories, we were ourselves, only smaller. Ourselves, with less knowledge, more innocence and a sense of wonder that often disappears as we age.

Five years ago, I went on a walk with a four-year-old boy named Jason. He took me to a copse of trees beside the house his grandfather was building. We plunged into the copse. "This is a jungle," he told me. I exclaimed at the large cats, got stuck behind an elephant, and let Jason rescue me. He led me to a log and told me to hold on. I did. He made little grrr sounds and then informed me that our spaceship was blasting off. We leaned

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left; we leaned right. We had just arrived on Mars when his father found us, and ended the excursion.

That's one of my favorite memories. Jason took me unquestioningly into his world, and I followed, willing to be led by an imagination much more powerful than my own. I remember being four. I remember losing myself to my imagination. Sometimes I wonder where I lost the ability to create a believable world out of sticks and grass.

Many adults find such use of imagination an alien thing. In fact, the most common denominator among all the theories of childhood is that they are developed by adults who view the child as something other, something alien. Very few theories of childhood accept children as fully human.

Which makes children perfect grist for science fiction, fantasy and horror stories. What other experience do we all share in common, yet view as alien? Childhood is an uncharted territory with deep, still waters that often affect our adult lives. Childhood is a stage that we have all outgrown. Childhood is a place to which we can never completely return again.

Children and childhood are the themes linking most of the stories in this issue. Each story propounds its own theory. Some explore what childhood will be like in the future. Others expand on what childhood may have been like in the past.

And beyond the theory, there is another unifying factor. The writers treat us as equals — as Jason treated me — inviting us into the worlds of the imagination and letting us roam through places we have never seen before.

Come sit on the log spaceship and smell the green grass of the jungle. The summer day won't last forever, but while it does, our imagination will take us on adventures — as it used to do when we were smaller versions of ourselves, so many years ago.

To Our Readers

This Fall, F&SF will publish a combined October/November 42nd Anniversary issue. At 240 pages, it will be the largest issue of new fiction we've ever published. On sale date is August 27, and subscribers will receive their copies shortly before this date. The next issue published will be December, on sale October 29. See "Coming Attractions" on page 161 for more details.

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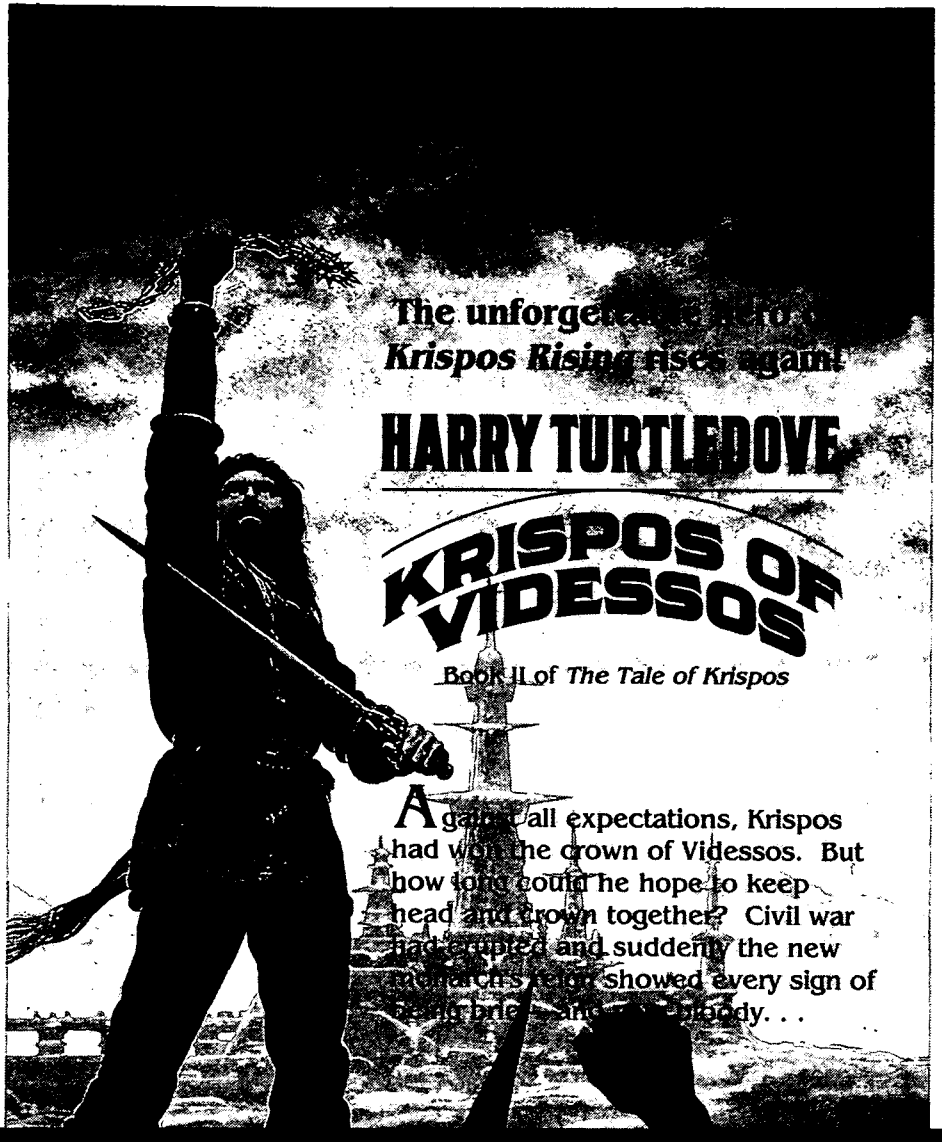
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While I was growing up, I always thought science fiction stories were about childless male heros who conquered space. I liked those stories, but they didn't seem important to my life in my small corner of the world. In "The Invisible Worm," Brian Stableford shows that science fiction can touch on issues of current importance. Here he examines an alternate method of child-rearing in a unique, suspense-filled environment. Brian's last story for F&SF was "The Man Who Loved the Vampire Lady" (August 1988), which later formed part of his novel, The Empire of Fear. *His short story collection,* Sexual Chemistry: Sardonic Tales of the Genetic Revolution, *just appeared in his home country, England.*

THE INVISIBLE WORM

By Brian Stableford

RICK FIRST NOTICED THE sick rose when he went to lift Steven for his morning feed, but he didn't pay any particular attention to it because his mind was on other things—mainly Steven's voice. For one so young, Steven had a lusty pair of lungs, and when he exercised them Rick wasted no time in responding. The sound went through him like a knife.

Rick sometimes wondered whether everyone might have some built-in unique and secret sensory key which, when turned, would plunge him into a private Hell of unparalleled excruciation. If so, he thought, some horribly unkind whim of chance had surely given Steven the uncanny knack of hitting it spot on.

The silence which fell once he had established the baby in the feeding-nook was a blessed relief, but the relief was—as usual—tinged with guilt.

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Now, when Rick looked down at the baby, sucking vigorously away at the teat, he was able to feel conventionally loving. It was only when Steven cried. . . .

He had not expected that having a baby in the house would be so disturbing, so frequently painful. He knew perfectly well how lucky and how privileged the household was—he and his five co-parents had waited nearly ten years to come through the waiting-list after first submitting their application for a license—and he was sure that he loved Steven as much as any co-father could, but he had never imagined that being carer-of-the-week could be so stressful, so exhausting, and so nerve-racking.

The problem, he supposed, was that he had never been around babies much. Nobody had, these days. Even as a baby you didn't get to be around babies much, no matter how much effort your co-parents put into the awkward business of arranging playtimes.

Rick did not dare to admit the extent of his confusion and difficulty to his five co-parents—not because they would not understand, but rather because they would *insist* on understanding, at great and wearisome length. They would schedule a fortnight of evening meetings so that they could all discuss the psychological roots of existential unease and the hazards of bonding failure, and spend hours lamenting the fact that the emotional underside of human nature had been shaped in the long-gone days when it was usual for people to be biologically related to the children they reared. He preferred to suffer their unthinking impatience; one could only take so much five-handed moral support.

It was in order to subvert his vague annoyance with himself that Rick went back to inspect the imperfect rose. He had to make an effort to pull himself together before he could examine it properly. He couldn't remember which of his co-parents had pressed so hard for pink decor in the nursery, but it certainly hadn't been him; he didn't like wallflowers and he thought that pink roses were terminally cute.

The rose didn't look well at all; its pink petals were extensively mottled with ochreous yellow. Rick was tempted to pluck the flower immediately and hurl it into the cloaca to which all the rest of the nursery's wastes were consigned. Another would grow to take its place, in time. He reached out to do it, but then he hesitated. He realized belatedly that the sickening of the rose might conceivably be a symptom of something serious. The nursery was supposed to be free of all non-

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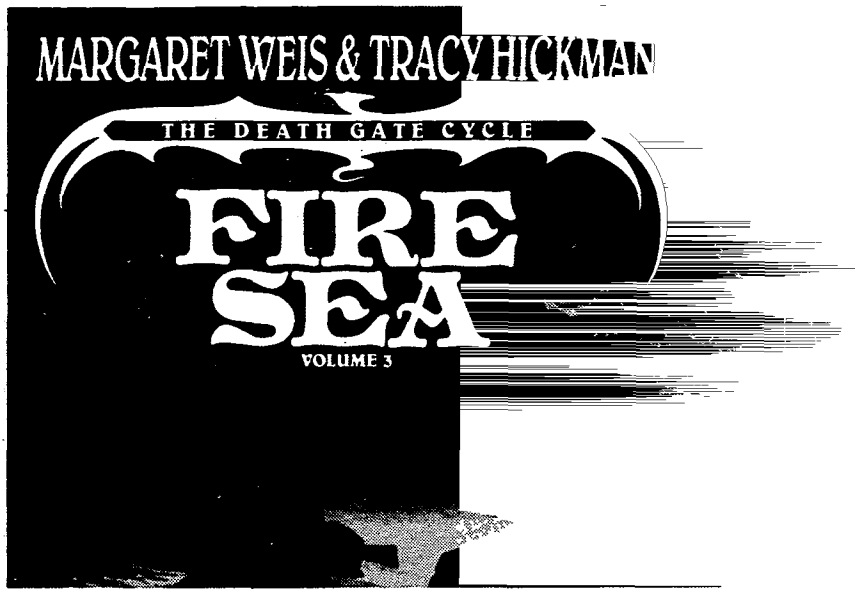

functional biota, even kinds which were harmless to everything except wallflowers.

Rick studied the petals again, more carefully Then he scanned the neighboring corollas. They too were beginning to show early signs of discoloration.

"Oh *pollution*," he murmured. "Why me?" Carer-of-the-week was nominally in charge of the house as well as the baby, but that was usually a sinecure because nothing ever went wrong with the house.

There was a screen set into the rosewood half a meter to the left of the yellowing rose, and Rick punched in the code for the house's cellular troubleshooting program. He entered the location codes, and watched the screen, hoping fervently that no human action would be necessary in facilitating treatment of the trouble-spot.

But the screen flashed up: ALL CLEAR.

"How can it be *all clear*, moron?" he asked, out loud. "It's supposed to be an eternal bloom, immortal unless picked"

Unfortunately, the cellular troubleshooter was a low-grade system As artificial intelligences went, it really was a moron Rick pressed RETRY,

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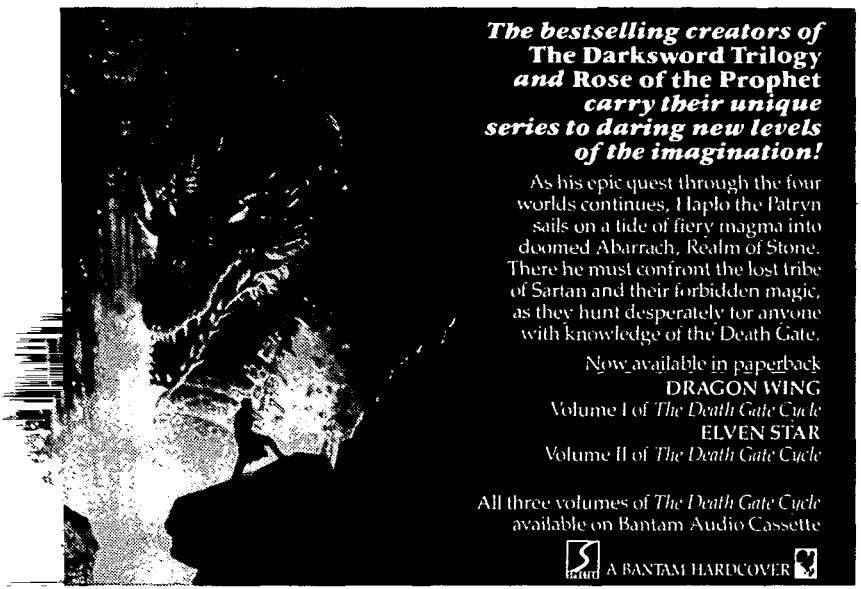
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but he knew it wouldn't get him anywhere. The message stubbornly held its center-screen ground.

Across the room, Steven let go of the teat and began to exercise his lungs again. He was a light but frequent feeder, and he tended to mop up a lot of air when he ate. The feeding-nook was a clever piece of design, but it wasn't versatile enough to take care of *every* need.

Rick hurried over to pick Steven up, and hoisted the naked baby high on to his left shoulder. Then he began walking round and round the cradle, rubbing Steven's back gently and rhythmically. Inevitably, Steven could not be content with a delicate burp. He brought a few millilitres of milk back with the air, and dribbled it down the back of Rick's shirt. Rick stripped off the shirt and dropped it into the laundry-port, trying not to curse the child.

The next item on Steven's schedule was his morning bath. He was, of course, quite clean already—the cradle was fully equipped for waste-disposal—but the co-parents knew from their assiduous studies how vital it was to maintain a child's water-familiarity. The household soviet had designed the carer's routines with that in mind. The baby-bath, like the cradle, was an outgrowth of the nursery wallwood, but it normally stood

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empty for hygiene's sake. Rick activated the tear ducts, and stood cuddling Steven while he waited for it to fill up. Steven was no longer wailing, and there was nothing to distract Rick's attention from the gentle trickle of water.

Because the bath was dark brown Rick did not immediately observe that anything was amiss. It wasn't until there were eight or ten centimetres of liquid in the shallow bowl that he realized that the water was discolored. He dipped his hand in and brought out a little of the liquid, cupped in the palm. It was faintly straw colored, and it had an odd feel.

He knew then that the problem was serious. A sickly wallflower was one thing, but an unidentified substance in the baby-bath was something else: it was a naked threat to the well-being of the household's most precious member.

The household had no in-living biotechnician. Three of the co-parents worked in construction and deconstruction, and therefore knew something about house-systems, but Don and Nicola were away on site somewhere in South America and Dieter was strictly a mud-and-sand gantzer who couldn't tell left-handed wood from right. Not only was there no expert help on hand, but there was no one in the house who could reasonably be interrupted at work in order to commiserate with him. Rosa—who was in Ed and Ents, like Rick himself—was busy tutoring. Chloe was plugged into a robominer way down in the mid-Atlantic trench. Dieter had a DO NOT DISTURB sign posted.

Rick went back to the screen, activated the camera, and called a doctor.

The doctor was a little slow coming on screen, but at least she didn't put Rick on hold. The ID code on the screen told him that her name was Maura Jauregy. She looked overdue for a rejuve, but Rick found that slightly comforting. Wrinkles—provided that they were subtly understated—still seemed to him to be somehow emblematic of wisdom.

"I'm Richard Reece," said Rick, though he knew that the doctor's screen would already be displaying his name and address. "I think our house has a problem, but the lar keeps flashing an ALL CLEAR signal. The symptoms aren't extreme—a few wallflowers that look as if they're sick, and discolored bathwater—but they're in the nursery, and we can't take any chances with the baby."

Dr. Jauregy could see the baby, because Rick was holding him up to the

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camera, and she nodded to indicate that she understood.

"I'm activating my diagnostic AI now, Mr. Reece," she said. "Can you lower the drawbridge to let it in?"

Rick punched out the codes that would open the house's systems to interrogation and investigation by the doctor's specialist software. He watched her face while she studied a datascreen to the left of camera. She had an old-fashioned professional frown that was really quite charming.

"Mmm. . ." she said, speculatively. Then she looked straight at the camera again. "Could you help me out, Mr. Reece? Can you remove a few petals from the affected flower, and a cupful of water from the bath? Place them in two separate sections of the dispenser unit. No need to activate any analysis programs; I'll use my own."

He did as he had been asked, and then politely placed himself in front of the camera again, so that he and the doctor could look at one another. Her professional frown gradually deepened, until it seemed to Rick to be positively funereal.

"Very odd," she said, after a while. "Very odd indeed."

"The nursery systems were only installed a couple of months ago," said Rick, knowing that his input was probably unnecessary but feeling that he ought to make an effort to help out. "We didn't have our own womb put in; we collected Steven after delivery. The wood and the wallflowers are dextrorotatory—they're supposed to be non-metabolizable by all feral organisms and fully immune to all natural pathogens."

"Of course, of course," said Dr. Jauregy, contemplatively. "The trouble is that so much progress has been made recently in dextro-rotatory organics that there's an awful lot of dr-DNA floating around. It might be something that got into it at the manufacturers and lay dormant. On the other hand, it might be something else. Exactly *what* though. . . ."

"You don't know what it is, then?" said Rick, feebly.

"Not *yet*," agreed the doctor, obviously choosing her words very carefully. "There's a slim possibility that the root of the trouble isn't organic at all. It may be a fault in your electronics, at the silicon/biochip interface. If something in the software were interfering with the nutritional upkeep of your organics, that would account for the fact that your lar won't recognise that anything's amiss. You've definitely got bugs of *some* kind rattling around in the walls, but it might not be easy to figure out exactly what they are. Are any members of your household professionally

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involved in cutting-edge biotech?

"No," said Rick. "We're just ordinary people. No intellectuals here."

"It's probably something very minor," the doctor said. "But it will need investigating. I'll have to come over."

"In person?" said Rick, in astonishment. He had never known a doctor to make a house call before—although he supposed, on reflection, that doctors who specialized in the diseases of houses probably had to do it fairly frequently.

"It makes it easier to prod and poke about," said Dr. Jauregy, "and although it may well be something utterly trivial, it's got my AI thoroughly confused. I'll pick up a robocab and be with you in two hours or so. I'll leave my systems hooked up, if you don't mind—feel free to call the cabscreen if anything else comes up."

"No problem," said Rick.

"I don't suppose . . ." the doctor began, and then paused.

"What?" asked Rick.

"Have any of you any *enemies*?" she asked, trying to imply by her manner that she naturally assumed that the answer would be "no," but that she felt obliged to check it out just in case.

"You think someone might be doing this *deliberately*?" said Rick, utterly horrified by the thought. "You think someone might be trying to *poison our house*?"

"I doubt it," she said with a slight sigh, perhaps also doubting her own wisdom in having asked the question. "As I said, it's probably something utterly trivial. Two hours, then." And then, having deftly planted the seed of an awful anxiety, she switched off.

CHLOE WAS still mentally lost in the ocean-depths, even though her body was peacefully slumped into an armchair in her cubby-hole. Dieter, though he probably wasn't working at all, still had his systems programmed to post DO NOT DISTURB messages in response to all inquiries. As soon as Rosa had finished her tutorial, though, she responded to Rick's appeal for someone to talk to.

"Of course we don't have any enemies," she said, when he'd recounted the whole of his conversation with the doctor. "Who could possibly want to hurt our house—our *nursery*? It's probably an innate fault in the system, which is only just beginning to show up. Have you checked the

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rest of the house?"

"All except the cellar," said Rick. "But I wouldn't know what to look for, would I?"

The house's systems were arranged in the conventional fashion. The inorganic parts of its brain were in the attic-space under the roof; the pump controlling its various circulatory systems was in the cupboard under the stairs. Rick had opened both cubby-holes to look in, but there had been nothing visibly amiss. He hadn't gone down into the cellar mainly because he didn't much like the cellar, which was cramped and crowded. All the waste-recycling systems were down there; so were the knotted roots whose growing-points extended deep into the ungantzed substratum on which the foundations were built, scavenging for minerals and water. The lighting down there was minimal; it was the only part of the house that was actually *gloomy*.

"It has to be the new systems," said Rosa, as though trying to convince herself. "It's not right, though—it's not as if we cut any corners cost-wise. Those nursery-fittings were the best we could afford. It's not right."

"It might be *because* they're state-of-the-art that all the bugs haven't been ironed out yet," Rich suggested. "New technologies always have teething problems—just like babies."

She didn't seem to be listening. "You don't suppose Dieter brought something back on his boots when he came back from Africa, do you?" she said. "He was carer last week, wasn't he?"

"He was in the middle of the Kalahari desert," said Rick. "That's the last place in the world where you might pick up a bug capable of metabolizing dextro-rotatory proteins."

"He came back on a plane," she countered, combatively. "Planes these days are full of dr stuff."

Rick couldn't help thinking that Rosa wasn't being as supportive as she might have been, and he felt let down. It was strictly taboo to love one of one's co-spouses significantly more than the others, lest one be thought guilty of singling, but Rick always felt particularly vulnerable with Rosa. She wasn't as good-looking as Chloe or Nicola, but there was something about her that always made his heart feel as if it might melt, and he didn't like it when she was annoyed with him.

For once, he was grateful when Steven began to whimper; having someone to talk to didn't seem to be helping much.

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"I'd better feed him again," said Rick.

"He can't be hungry already," Rosa complained. "It's not time."

"He didn't have much last time," Rick answered, apologetically, "and he burped some of that back again." He realized even as he spoke that there just might be a sinister implication in what he was saying. "Oh pollution," he said, softly. "I can't just put him back in the nook, can I? Not if the nursery's sick. What can I do, Rosie?"

"Take him to the dining room," said Rosa. "The main system can mix baby milk just as well as the nursery nook."

"But it hasn't got a teat!" Rick protested. "I can't feed him with a spoon, can I?"

"Get the dispenser to mold one out of soft plastic," she said. "There must be a program for it *somewhere* in the library. One that fits on to a bottle. It's a bit twenty-first century, but it's bound to work."

"He won't like it," said Rick, mournfully.

"It's not good for him to get bogged down in a routine of comforts," said Rosa, sternly. Because she did so much work in primary ed she considered herself the household expert on child-rearing, although she was very particular about not doing more than her fair share of caring. "He needs a bit of innovation and improvisation occasionally—especially at the "elementary level".

Steven had by now begun to amplify his whimpers, and was getting set for a full-scale bawl. Rick hurried away with him, hoping that he could find the requisite program, and that the dispenser could deliver the goods in time to save his ears from too much torture.

"There have been some developments, I'm afraid," said the doctor, mournfully, when she arrived at the house. "The lab has completed the scan of the rose's dr-DNA and the extraneous matter in the bathwater. It all looks a bit iffy. I've had to call in some help, but you musn't worry. We've caught the problem early, and it's just a matter of backtracking to figure out how it started. When the other people arrive, we're going to have to seal off the nursery for a while and unsurp control of the house's main systems. You'll have to wind down any work you're doing, and you may experience some localized control problems, but everything will be all right and with luck we'll be out of here in a matter of hours. *Don't worry.*"

The last piece of advice was difficult to follow, and it became even

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more difficult when the first of Dr. Jauregy's "other people" arrived. His name was Ituro Morusaki and his ID declared him to be an officer of the International Bureau of Investigation. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about," he said, breezily. "But we have to take precautions whenever there's a possibility that a crime might have been committed."

"What crime?" asked Rick.

"Any crime," answered the IBI man, unhelpfully.

"You mean software sabotage, don't you?" said Rosa, with a keen edge of anxiety in her voice. "You think we're the victim of a terrorist attack! But why us? What have we ever done to anyone?"

Officer Morusaki put up his hands defensively. "No, no!" he said. "We mustn't jump to any conclusions. We simply don't know what we're dealing with, and it could be *anything*. Please don't worry."

He didn't hang around to be questioned any further. He disappeared into the nursery, to confer with Dr. Jauregy.

By this time Dieter and Chloe had been alerted to the fact that something was seriously amiss, and they had joined Rick and Rosa in the main common room.

"Well," said Chloe, "*I'm* squeaky clean, greenwise. What did you get up to in Africa, Dieter?"

"Helping to reclaim the Kalahari desert is hardly an eco-crime," Dieter countered, testily. "The Gaians can't possibly have anything against *me*. What are Don and Nicola doing down in Amazonia? That's the Gaians' number one area of concern, isn't it? Maybe *they've* done something to piss off Mother Earth's Avengers."

"Don't be ridiculous," Rosa told them both. "They're only techs, not planners. Gaians don't send electronic mail bombs to the likes of *us*."

Steven wasn't at all happy with the bottle that Rick was trying—inexpertly—to force into his mouth. There was something about the teat that he didn't like, in spite of the fact that he was hungry. His face was red and his eyes were screwed up tight and he was mewling pitifully. It wasn't a full-blown tantrum yet, but it was going on that way. Rick gritted his teeth and tried to be patient, yet firm.

"Do it *gently*," Chloe advised. "You're upsetting him. We all have to keep calm, for *his* sake."

"I heard about some practical joker who used a random-number generator to send copies of a spoiler virus through the net," said Dieter.

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"Maybe that's what happened—maybe our number just got thrown up at random."

"Don't be silly," said Rosa. "This isn't something that flashes silly messages on our screens—it's something that is sabotaging our *nursery*. What kind of joker would do a thing like that?"

Steven, clearly despairing of half-measures, began to yell. He hadn't yet begun to strike the secret note, but Rick could tell that the gathering crescendo was heading in that direction.

"Oh, come *on* Rick!" Dieter complained. "Can't you at least keep him quiet, so we can *think* about this. This is important!"

Rick abandoned the bottle and tried to jolly Steven out of the crying fit by bouncing him around a bit. He knew that it wasn't going to work, but at least it demonstrated to the others that he was *trying*. Silently, he willed the baby to be quiet, but the power of positive thinking which he was trying to exercise kept getting interrupted by silent pleas and curses.

"Wrap him up," said Rosa. "He's not in the nursery now and the ambient temperature's too low for him—find something soft and warm and comforting, then try the bottle again."

The torrent of advice did nothing to soothe Rick's temper; it only made him more aggrieved. But the one thing he couldn't do was to hand Steven over to someone else and say, "*You* take care of the little brat." That would really call down the wrath of Heaven upon him.

The lar informed them that someone else was at the door, and Rosa went to let in the second of Dr. Jauregy's expected helpers. His name was Lionel Murgatroyd, and his ID informed them that he was with the Ministry of Defense.

"The Ministry of *Defense*!" said Dieter, incredulously. "What is this —World War Five?"

"No, no, no," Mr. Murgatroyd assured them. "It's nothing to worry about—nothing at all. A routine notification under the rather-be-safe policy. *Please* don't let your imagination run away with you. It's just that where novel DNA is concerned, especially when it seems to be a bit on the nasty side, we have to be *extremely* careful."

They didn't have time to ask Mr. Murgatroyd any more questions, because he was seized by Officer Morusaki and hauled into the nursery.

"We have to seal everything up now," said Morusaki cheerfully, as he prepared to close the door behind him. "We're taking control of all the

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house's systems except for the fundamental subroutines, so you won't be able to phone out or call up data from the net. You may experience some slight problems while we're running tests, but please be patient."

The nursery door closed behind him, and the four householders exchanged helpless looks. Nobody wanted to start asking accusative questions about who might or might not have got the house a front-line posting in the next Plague War. The thought was too preposterous to entertain.

Steven was still bawling, despite the fact that Rick—following Rosa's suggestion—had managed to summon up a warm and soft ultrawoolly shawl. Rick tried unsuccessfully to persuade the baby to accept the makeshift teat, but Steven obviously wanted the nursery nook and wasn't prepared to accept any second-rate substitutes—not, at least, without making his protest first. Rick had retreated to the corner of the room farthest away from his co-parents in the hope of reducing the nuisance level slightly, but it was a futile gesture.

"I know one thing," said Dieter, raising his voice above the din. "Whatever it is and however it got into our systems, this thing is *dangerous*. It has weapon-potential. They want to tame it before they stop it—that's why they're beavering away in there under the protection of a full-scale security shield."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Chloe. "If it's organic, it must be dextro-rotatory. It can't hurt anything living—not *really* living. It can only affect right-handed proteins."

"Chloe, darling," said Dieter, with uncharacteristically bitter sarcasm. "Half the world lives in houses made from dr-wood, and dresses in dr-clothes. There are dr-components in virtually every machine our factories produce. A virus that could eat its way through dr-materials would be the ideal humane weapon. It could wreck a nation's property without actually killing anyone."

"You're being silly," said Rosa, shortly. "There aren't any lr-viruses that destroy all laevo-rotatory materials, even after three billion years of lr-evolution. Why should a universally destructive dr-virus suddenly turn up out of the blue? And if it did, why on earth would it make its first appearance in our nursery? Rick, *can't* you keep the poor little mite quiet for a while."

Rick interrupted the murmurous stream of soothing noises that he

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was emitting into Steven's ear in order to say "No." Then he added, "Oh *pollution!*" as he realized to his discomfort that the ultrawoolly had suffered a sudden attack of stinking stickiness.

He moved rapidly to the disposal chute, hitting the control-button with his elbow because his hands were over-full with the bottle and the wrapped-up baby. The lid failed to respond to his signal. He jabbed it again, and then again, but nothing happened.

He turned round to complain but saw that Rosa was now busy giving Dieter an extended, if inexpert, lecture on the elements of dextro-rotatory organic chemistry. Dieter, obviously resentful of being treated as if he were one of her primary ed counseling cases, was busy going red in the face. Rick knew that if he called their attention to what had happened they would merely point out with some asperity that the chute's systems must have fallen prey to the side-effects of the probings being carried out by the investigators in the nursery.

The door to the staircase which led down to the cellar was only a couple of feet away, and Rick kicked the control-panel, probably a little bit harder than was necessary. He sighed with relief when it opened, and he went swiftly through it. He glanced back as the door slid shut behind him, but only Chloe was taking any notice, and her expression showed profound relief that the crying baby was being taken away.

Rick figured that it would be possible to dispose of the polluted ultrawoolly into the cellar chute, and that even if it turned out not to be possible he could at least abandon the horrid thing, sluice Steven down, and then have another go at persuading him to take the bottle without having to suffer the censorious glares of his co-parents. He took the six steps two at a time, and made his way along the narrow corridor between the massed root-ridges to the portal set in the basal trunk.

The portal opened readily enough, and he sighed with relief. He had thrown the ultra-woolly in before he realized that all was not well *within* the chute.

Instead of falling away through empty space to the reclamation-chamber the soiled garment landed in a pool of turbid water whose surface was only a couple of centimetres below the opening. Because of the odiferous nature of the stain on the shawl Rick did not at first notice that the water was also rather noisome, but when he leaned over to take a closer look the fact became abundantly clear.

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He also noticed that the level of the water was slowly rising. The house was evidently experiencing difficulties in the waterworks.

Rick's first supposition was that the three investigators in the nursery must already know about this problem, given that they had taken over all the house's systems, but then he remembered that the lar had stubbornly insisted that nothing was wrong in the nursery. Perhaps, given Mr. Murgatroyd's declared allegiance to the philosophy of better-be-safe, they should be told.

Rick climbed back up to the cellar door, which had closed automatically behind him, and brought his knee up to tap the control panel.

The door didn't open.

Rick cursed. He hung the loudly-squalling Steven over his shoulder, switched the feeding-bottle from his left hand to his right, and tapped the panel again with his fingers.

The door still failed to respond.

Rick turned to the screen beside the door and poked the keyboard beneath it. The screen remained dead, as he had expected. The men in the nursery had presumably switched off the circuitry for some arcane purpose of their own.

He turned around to look back at the waste-chute. The portal was still open, and the water level had now reached its rim. Water began to spill over. While Rick watched, the floating ultrawoolly was carried over the lip of the precipice, and fell soggily to the floor, where it sat lumpenly in a rapidly spreading pool of discolored liquid.

"*Pollution!*" said Rick, with feeling. "Pollution, corrosion and *copulating corruption*!" The obscenities seemed oddly ineffective, given their incipient literality.

He knew that there was no point at all in shouting for help. The house was well-designed, and the walls and ceiling were far too efficient at dampening out sounds.

He realized that he was trapped.

EVEN THOUGH he knew there was no point, Rick yelled for help; there seemed no harm in trying. In the meantime, he struggled to think of something more likely to get results.

Steven responded to the unexpected competition with a moment's startled silence, but then began to compete with a will,

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increasing his own efforts to be heard. Within seconds he began to hit *that* note. The din was too appalling to be tolerated, and Rick shut up.

Steven didn't. Rick gritted his teeth and tried to shut out the sound, but the screams went deep into the core of his brain.

Rick went to the top of the cellar steps and kicked the door, very hard. Nothing happened, and he kicked it again, even harder. Then, holding Steven carefully at arm's length, he rammed it with his shoulder.

The door absorbed the brutal mistreatment with dignified ease, swallowing the sound of the impacts. The blows had discharged a little of Rick's frustration, but he wasn't sufficiently masochistic to keep going until he did himself an injury.

"Shut up, you little bastard," he said to Steven, with asperity. He had never before dared speak aloud to the baby in such hostile terms, but he felt that he might as well take what meager advantage he could of the fact that no one could hear him. He didn't mean it, of course—not *really*.

He looked down at the floor, which was now covered by a thin scum of something horrible. The scum was slowly being elevated by the water on which it floated. He watched it for a minute or so, watching the meniscus climb the knobly walls of the root-complex. He estimated that the level was now rising by about a centimetre per minute, and noted that the flow seemed to be increasing. His feet were less than a metre above the surface, and he knew that he wasn't much more than a metre-and-a half tall. His mental arithmetic could do the simple averaging well enough, but he didn't know how to figure in the possible effects of the accelerating flow.

"Shut up!" he said to Steven, in a low but fierce tone. "This is *serious*. If we aren't out of here soon. . . ."

At a centimeter a minute, he knew, they would have four hours. Four hours, looked at dispassionately, was a long time, but Rick already knew that it was the highest possible figure. The faster the rate of flow was increasing, the quicker that four hours would become three, and then two . . . and all the while, it was also being eroded by actual elapsed time. Rick looked about him at the cellar, whose narrow passages and dim lighting had always made him feel slightly claustrophobic. His mental arithmetic wasn't up to calculating the actual cubic capacity of the room, but the looming root-processes and the thick central trunk of the house had never seemed more massive.

Steven also seemed utterly convinced that something was badly

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wrong. He was certainly yelling as if he believed that his life was in danger.

"*Please* shut up," complained Rick, changing tactics. "For Gaia's sake, *let me think!*"

After all, he told himself, he was bound to be missed. Chloe, Rosa and Dieter might already have noticed that he was gone, and might have begun to get worried . . .except, of course, that they couldn't know that the cellar was being flooded. They would undoubtedly discover as soon as they tried it that the door was stuck, and they would undoubtedly figure out that it was a side-effect of whatever Dr. Jauregy's troubleshooting crew was doing, but they wouldn't necessarily feel any sense of urgency about getting him out. In fact, they might be profoundly glad that they no longer had to listen to Steven's crying, and in no hurry at all to expose themselves to it again. They might be sitting upstairs right now, *joking* about his bad luck and his parental incompetence.

It was, he decided, definitely time to get worried.

Rick sat down on the top step, biting his lip anxiously, and began to rock Steven in his arms. Steven continued to cry, but not quite so loudly. The crying seemed slightly less appalling now—indeed, it suddenly seemed to be entirely appropriate, given the situation. It was no longer so excruciating.

"Okay son," said Rick, looking down into the baby's screwed-up eyes and making every possible effort to be civil, "we've got to think about this logically. The odds are that we'll be out of here long before that tide of filth is up to the soles of my sneakers, but just in case . . . *just in case*, mind you . . . we ought to figure out some way of attracting attention to our predicament. The three wise men may have got the house's nerve-net into a terrible tangle, but they can't have anaesthetized it entirely. We have to wake it up. It's fighting sabotage with sabotage, but it's the only way." He was trying to sound calm, for his own sake rather than for Steven's, but he couldn't fool himself. He was scared—really scared.

For a moment he consoled himself with the inspiration that the house's central supply-tank and reclamation unit couldn't possibly contain enough water to fill the cellar completely, but no sooner had the elation of this thought buoyed him up than he noticed a distinct whiff of sterilizing fluid in the air.

"Oh *pollution!*" he said, as his heart skipped a beat. "It's the water from

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He looked around for something that he could use to hurt the house.

the pool, too. . . .we really *are* in trouble."

Steven just went on bawling, but Rick took that as an indication of agreement. He stood up and descended to the third step, then turned around to lay the baby down on the top one. He wiped his fingers on his shirt, and looked around for something that he could use to hurt the house—not much, but just enough to make sure that the act would not go unnoticed.

Unfortunately, the tool cabinet that was set in the wall beside the staircase wouldn't open, and all the tools that might have sufficed to pry it open were inside. His anxiety grew, and the nausea induced by the vilely mixed odors of the dirty water made it feel even worse.

"Corruption," he said, unsteadily. It wasn't so much the thought that he was going to have to use his bare hands to attack the root-processes as the thought that he was going to have to stand calf-deep in the rising tide of filthy water while he did it. He knew that he would have to snap one of the slimmer rootlets, and the thinnest ones were all close to ground-level.

He looked down at Steven, who was lying on his back like a stranded beetle, kicking his legs and screaming as if he were about to burst.

"All right," he said. "I'm going."

He stepped down into the murky water, feeling it ooze unpleasantly into his soft-soled shoes. Two squelching strides took him to what looked like a suitably fragile bundle of root fibers, and he managed to get his forefinger around a single filament that was no thicker than Steven's smallest digit.

He pulled at it. Then he heaved upward with all his strength, bracing himself with his feet. He fully expected the rootlet to break, but his expectation was not based in experience—he had never before had any occasion to try the experiment. The root was far tougher than it looked, and more elastic. It stretched a little, but it didn't snap.

Rick didn't bother to swear. He simply forced a second finger around the rootlet, and gathered all his strength, making sure that he would exert the maximum leverage of which he was capable.

He heaved.

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The pain in his fingers was indescribable, but he did not relax until he was convinced that it would take less force to tear them off than it would to snap the rootlet. He extracted the two digits with difficulty, and nursed them tenderly while he looked down, furiously, at the stubborn filament. While he watched there was a sudden surge in the flow of turbid water, and a wave swamped the rootlet.

He realized that he was knee-deep, and that the flow was fast becoming a flood. Four hours had been a hopelessly optimistic estimate even at the time. Now, though he did not pause to measure and calculate, he figured that he had less than forty minutes.

We're going to drown! he thought, wildly. *We're really going to drown!*

Rick was fifty-three years old; nine-tenths of his life still lay before him. Steven was less than six months old. . . . but in spite of the fact that he really did love the child, Rick could not help thinking that his own tragedy was the greater. Steven had hardly begun to be aware of the world, and had no sense whatsoever of the magnitude of his possible loss. To Steven the present situation was no worse than being offered a bottle with an unfamiliar teat, but to Rick. . . .

Rick had never been in mortal danger before. He had never *felt* that he was in mortal danger before. The fact that he was in his own home, and that the only baby he was likely to be licensed to look after for at least two hundred years was with him, depending on him, made the feeling ten times worse than it could have been had he been somewhere out in the wild and still-slightly-dangerous world.

He looked around desperately, cursing the strength and economy of modern design and the careful tidiness of his co-parents. There was not a single object lying around loose, and everything built into the house's systems was built to last, resistant to any and all attempts at vandalism. He couldn't see *anything* that might be used as a lever or a club.

Steven howled and kicked on the top step. Again he struck that horrible, hellish note.

Don't panic! Rick told himself, knowing that it was already too late; he was in no condition to take such advice.

It had to be something dead, Rick instructed himself, trying against the odds to be reasonable. The problem with the rootlet was that it was part of the living structure of the house, as was everything wooden—even the stairs. On the other hand, all the house's inorganics were buried deep

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inside the living tissues, except. . . .

He struggled back to the foot of the stairway, and up it. His eyes were fixed on the mute and useless screen beside the door. His breathing was ragged and his heart was racing.

He didn't know how strong the plastic screen might be, but he had seen people hurl objects through offending screens on half a hundred vid-shows, so he knew that it could be done, and that it produced shards with sharp edges.

He also knew that he had nothing to hit it with but his fist, and that those sharp edges were going to do nasty things to his knuckles, but he wasn't about to wait around hoping that it wouldn't be necessary.

Rick came back to the second step, and braced himself again, laying his left palm flat against the unopenable door. He balled his fist up as tight as he could, ignoring the pain in his two damaged fingers, and psyched himself up for the punch, telling himself sternly that he *must* follow through, hitting with all his might.

Steven's howling seemed to grow even louder as he focused his attention, and he let fly.

His fist rebounded.

The shock of the reaction sent a wave of pain through his hand into his wrist and all the way up his arm and he howled in agony. He cursed volubly, not bothering with the customary euphemisms. He felt that he was about to burst into tears, although he could not tell whether it was pain or terror that had brought him to that pitch of anguish.

As soon as the pain began to die down, though, he started thinking again, madly and furiously. He knew that his shoes were too soft, and that there was no way he could contort himself into such a position that he would be able to lash out at the screen with his bare heel. If he was to hit the screen again he would have to use either his fist—the left, this time—or his head.

Rick had no idea how hard his head was, or how much force he could get into a butt, but he knew that it would give him a terrible headache if the screen didn't break. He cursed the wonderful resilience of modern materials, and the marvellous ingenuity of modern technics. He inspected the keyboard beneath the screen, wondering if there might be a weak spot anywhere there. He tried inserting his fingernails into all the cracks and crevices, but he was too well-manicured to have much effect. He thumped

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the keys a few times, not too heavily, just in case the keys might respond to the extra pressure, but nothing happened.

He conceded that he was going to have to hit the screen again. He tossed up, mentally, between head and hand. Hand won.

He moved right to the edge of the step, shoving Steven a little closer to the wall. Again he braced himself; again he psyched himself up. Then, perversely, he looked down at the rising tide of filth, which was now only one step down. He could see that if the screen didn't break this time, he was going to have to pick Steven up and hold him, to keep him out of harm's way.

He turned back toward the screen, and stared at it as though it were something utterly loathsome, which had to be destroyed. He felt that his entire nervous system was screaming—reasonating with that dreadful note that only Steven could produce and that only he in all the world could properly appreciate.

He launched his left fist at the screen, with every last vestige of his strength, howling aloud in fury.

The screen imploded, bursting into fifty or a hundred shards, some of which peppered his face before falling. Only a handful hit Steven, and none did him any damage.

Oddly enough—or so it seemed—the successful blow did not hurt Rick's hand nearly as much as the unsuccessful one had, but the shards did indeed cut him in a dozen different places, and blood began to ooze out everywhere. The biggest, sharpest triangular shard was still stuck to the rim of the casing, but Rick pulled it out easily. Then he began poking at the machinery inside the screen. There were bare wires on display now, and circuit-boards—lots of complicated and vulnerable assemblies. He cut, slashed and scraped with gay abandon . . . but nothing happened. The machinery was quite dead and disconnected.

Rick was alarmed to find himself trembling. He bent down swiftly to pick Steven up, snatching him away from the turbid floodwater just before it reached the edge of the trailing shawl. Then he looked around desperately. All the thinner root-filaments were under the surface now, but there was still plenty of bare wood visible—wood that was scratchable and cuttable. But where was he to cut? Where was he to scratch?

He felt that he could no longer think, no longer plan.

Steven was still screaming, and his tiny hand grappled with Rick's ear.

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The baby sounded truly desperate, as though he had somehow sensed that things were going from bad to worse, and his anxiety fed Rick's, redoubling it yet again.

Rick held the triangular shard high in the air, with one point outward, desperate to find some target to aim at. Carelessly, he leapt down into the foul-smelling fluid. His feet were on the floor but he was waist deep. He held Steven over one shoulder, and reached out to hack at the root-bundles near the steadily climbing surface.

The jagged edge made a scratch, but did not cut deeply. Rick ran it back and forth as fast as he could, trying to make the cut deeper. Steven yelled in his ear, and the sound was so frightfully loud and urgent that it filled his head and brought forth tears of frustration in astonishing profusion.

He chopped and sawed and cursed for three full minutes before he suddenly realized that the surface of the flood had not swallowed up the spot he was attacking, and was no nearer to doing so than when he had started.

The flow had stopped, and the water-level had stabilized.

Rick was astonished by the wave of relief that flooded over him—a sudden realization that they might not be going to die. He did not realize how convinced he had been that he was doomed until the fear was suddenly swept away.

He threw the blunted plastic shard away, and took hold of Steven in both hands, pulling the baby around to cradle him against his chest.

"It's all right, son!" he said, as his tears of frustration became tears of amazement. "We're going to be all right!"

Steven's wild yelling abated, as though the message had got through. By slow degrees, as Rick hugged the baby to him, rocking gently from side to side, silence fell. The water level did not begin to fall, but it did not begin to rise again either. There was stability; there was peace.

Steven was no longer crying and Rick was no longer weeping.

Rick stood where he was, not moving an inch, for several minutes more. Steven put his face into the hollow of Rick's shoulder, and went to sleep, quite oblivious to the fact that the hand with which Rick was supporting his tiny bald head was still leaking blood from a dozen ragged cuts.

Then the door above them slid suddenly aside, and Rosa's voice,

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utterly aghast, said: "Corruption and corrosion, Rick! What are you *doing* to that poor child!"

DR. JAUREGY wasn't licensed to practise medicine on humans but she cleaned up his cuts and bandaged his hand. She had sufficient sense and sensibility not to start telling him what a fool he'd been, and he was glad of that. He'd heard enough from Rosa, Dieter and Chloe about what he ought to have known (that he wasn't really in danger), ought to have thought (that the sensible thing to do was wait) and ought to have done (nothing).

At first he had been astounded by their attitude, deeply wounded by their accusative tones. It had taken him some little while to realize that they had not the least understanding of what he had been through. He had done his best to point out that hindsight gave them calculative advantages which he had sadly lacked, but they had refused to listen, and even seemed intent on blaming him for the fact that the cellar was flooded, simply because he had been down there when it happened.

Rick was still seething with frustration and annoyance. He found it quite appalling that no one seemed to have the least idea of what he had been through, but he now realized how absurd his appearance and his conduct must have seemed to anyone who had not shared his experience. He dared not try to explain how terrified he had been, because he knew that it would only make him seem ridiculous. It was bad enough to have panicked, when—as things had turned out—panic had been quite unnecessary, but trying to explain how and why he had panicked, and attempting to justify his panicking, could now only make things worse.

Now that hindsight had delivered its verdict—that he had not drowned, and therefore had never been in *real* danger of drowning—all that he had suffered had been for nothing.

It was all horribly unfair, but there was nothing he could say or do to defend himself.

Mr. Murgatroyd was the only one who thought of offering any kind of apology, and even that was far from satisfactory. "Altogether unforeseen," he assured them, peering solemnly at Chloe, as though she and not Rick had been the one who had been hurt. "That's the trouble with unprecedented situations, I'm afraid. New bugs, new symptoms. Sorry we couldn't cope any better."

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"Does that mean you now know what it is?" asked Rick, sourly. "Or is it still a big mystery?"

Mr. Murgatroyd opened his mouth to reply, but paused because Officer Morusaki had just re-emerged from the cellar. "It's okay," said the IBI man. "The water level's going down. The house can take care of it all—give it six hours and the pool will be full again. The wood will mop up all the pollutants and redirect them all back to the reclamation tank. The rootlets are fine—he didn't do any real damage there. You'll need a new screen, of course, and a new set of circuit-boards—by the time they're installed, it will all be as good as new."

Rick felt the pressure of disapproving stares, but was determined not to feel guilty. "What about the nursery?" he said to the man from the Ministry.

"We've identified the culprit," said Murgatroyd, cheerfully. "As we said, there's nothing to worry about—nothing at all. Within forty-eight hours, everything will be back to normal."

"In the meantime," Dr. Jauregy put in, "just as a precaution, don't use the nursery systems—the main system is perfectly safe."

Morusaki nodded in agreement, smiling as he did so. There was something extraordinarily infuriating about the way they all looked. It wasn't just that they were carefully refusing to say exactly what it was they had found—each of them seemed to be possessed by a glow of private pleasure, which suggested that they were extremely pleased about their discovery. Rick glanced at Rosa, who was reluctantly holding the baby, and at Dieter; he could see that they were aware of it too.

"I think we're entitled to an explanation," he said, testily, to the doctor. "Don't you?"

Dr. Jauregy looked at Officer Morusaki, who looked at Mr. Murgatroyd, who looked dubious.

"If we really were the target of some new Gaian terror-weapon," said Rick, combatively, "I think we should be told—even if it wasn't aimed specifically at *us*."

"It's nothing like *that*," said Mr. Murgatroyd, swiftly. "I told you—my being called in was purely a matter of routine. It's nothing like that at all—but we're living in such interesting times, you see. The defense of the realm has become something of a nightmare, with so many viruses around, organic and inorganic. We have to be *very* careful. Plague wars

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aren't like the old heavy metal wars, you know; nobody bothers to *declare* them, and the weapons are very difficult to spot."

"But this isn't a new plague war, is it?" said Rosa, flatly.

"No," Mr. Murgatroyd confirmed, evidently quite glad about the fact. "It isn't. It's something very different. Not war, not terrorism . . . more like *creation*, really. The birth of a new kind of nature. Heaven only knows what the Gaians will make of it."

"Are you sure . . .?" Morusaki began, but Murgatroyd silenced him with a gesture.

"It won't hurt to explain," he said, although he let loose a slight sigh which signified that he would probably rather not have been asked to do so. "You see, there have already been a number of reports of newly evolved dr-DNA virues. Perhaps newly *devolved* dr-DNA viruses would be a better way of putting it, because we think they emerge by the mutation of chromosomal fragments displaced from the nuclei of dr-cells. There have also been suggestions that one or two of our very own laevo-rotatory nuisance-organisms are taking aboard dextro-rotatory biochemical apparatus so as to become facultative hybrids. A whole new phase of evolution is starting up . . . our artificial biotechnologies are beginning to spawn their own mutational progeny. I think that's very exciting, don't you?"

"But the whole point of making artifacts from dr-DNA is that they're immune to disease and decay," objected Rosa, stubbornly. "If they've started giving birth to their own diseases, that's *terrible*."

"I *said* it had to have weapon potential," said Dieter, in a tone of profound satisfaction. "What you're saying is that our house—*our house*—has accidentally spawned a mutant virus that's capable of messing up half the world's property. That's why you're so smug, isn't it? The next Plague War may not have begun today, but you think you've just got one step ahead in the arms race, don't you?"

"Of course not," said Mr. Murgatroyd. "What we've found is certainly a dr-virus, and it certainly seems to have arisen by spontaneous mutation, but it's not the doomsday weapon. Seen from one point of view, it's just the first of many minor nuisances that will soon be cropping up here, there and everywhere. There's so much dextrorotatory structural material around nowadays that it was only a matter of time before new bugs evolved to feed on it. It's been a wide-open ecological niche just begging to be colonized."

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"The Gaians aren't going to like it," said Rick, vindictively trying to puncture Mr. Murgatroyd's good humor. "It adds a whole new dimension of meaning to the idea of technology running wild."

"On the contrary," said Dr. Jauregy, who had now finished attending to his battle scars. "They'll probably see it as Mother Nature hitting back, defying us in our quest for perfect order. Your brand-new dr-virus might become a hero of the Counter-Revolution . . . or do I mean the Counter-*Evolution*." She grinned at her joke, though it seemed feeble enough to Rick, and nobody else laughed.

"Hey," said Dieter. "Is there anything in this for us? I mean, this is our house—we ought to have patent rights, or something!"

"I'm afraid not," said Officer Morusaki, smoothly. "There can be no patent rights in a spontaneous product of mutation unless the mutagenic process is deliberately induced."

"What about rights of discovery, then?" said Dieter. "We discovered it, didn't we?"

I discovered it, thought Rick, not *we*.

"You observed a sick rose," said Mr. Murgatroyd. "You could hardly be said to have discovered the invisible worm that sickened it. That honor, I fear, belongs to Dr. Jauregy, Officer Morusaki and myself. But if it makes you feel any better, there is no way in which any of us can profit personally from the discovery, because we are all here in our official capacities. Your house will share with our names the credit of a dozen footnotes in scientific journals and reference books, but none of us will make a penny."

"Except for me," Dr. Jauregy said, with polite regret. "I'm afraid I'll still have to bill you for the consultation and the treatment—and for the replacement of the screen downstairs, if you want me to see to that too."

Dieter's resentful stare switched from Mr. Murgatroyd to Rick, who simply looked away, pointedly refusing any comment.

"You mustn't be distressed," said Murgatroyd, amiably. "It really is best to look at it my way. This is a significant moment in the history of life on earth—the beginning of a new evolutionary sequence—and it began in your nursery.

"It's a kind of miracle, in a way: a happy gift of providence. Who knows what dextrorotatory DNA might eventually produce, in the fullness of time, now that it has taken its first small step toward independence from

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the shaping hand of man? Let's try to rise above mere matters of commerce, and fix our minds on that. Your nursery had a bad turn, and your cellar got flooded . . . but that wasn't what *really* happened here today. What really happened is that something new revealed itself to the world . . . something *really new*, and *alive*."

Rick was still mad at everyone, and his hands still hurt like hell, but he suddenly saw what Murgatroyd was getting at, and he saw that Murgatroyd was right. At the molecular level, something significant *had* happened . . . something far more important than a cut hand, or a fit of panic that might or might not have been too stupid for words.

A miracle. A happy gift of providence.

"Where is it now?" he asked, soberly. "If you're going to cure the house, how are you going to preserve the virus?"

Mr. Murgatroyd opened his case, and took out a plastic bag—probably one of several that he had in there. The sealed bag contained a single rose plucked from the nursery wall. As yet, it didn't look sick.

They all stared at it for a few seconds: all seven of them.

Then Mr. Murgatroyd put the rose back in his case, fastened it up, and headed for the door. It opened for him with what seemed to Rick to be craven servility. The doctor and the IBI man followed.

WHEN THEY had gone, Rosa came over to Rick, and dumped Steven into his lap.

"Well," she said, "that's that. I've got a counselling session in five minutes."

"Oh corruption," said Chloe. "I should have been hooked into that robominer twenty minutes ago."

Dieter had already disappeared, as though by magic.

Rick didn't feel too bad about being left alone. They had not even begun to understand what he had gone through, and that devalued the reassurance of their presence. Although he still felt in need of someone to listen, someone to sympathize, he knew that none of them could fulfill that role.

Steven opened his eyes, met Rick's eyes momentarily, and began to wail.

Rick looked down at the child, and his heart sank. *Forty-eight hours*, he thought, remembering what the visitors had said. It would be forty-

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eight hours before the nursery was safe for normal use. Until then. . . .

He got up and went into the kitchen, to salvage the bottle and the teat. It was a bit twenty-first century, but he figured that with luck it ought to work, now that Steven was hungry enough.

It did. After spitting it out once, Steven compromised and started sucking. Silence fell.

Rick stroked the baby's head with the hand that the doctor had dressed and sealed with syntho-flesh. It felt very odd.

"We really were in trouble down there, you know," said Rick, levelly. "Not that anybody gives a damn one way or the other, now it's all come out okay. I was trying to save our lives, because I had every reason to think they needed saving."

Steven didn't even spare him a glance, but that didn't matter.

"*You* understand, don't you?" Rick continued. "You were there, and you were yelling even louder than I was. You knew what we were going through. You know what I did, and why. It's our secret, kid—just yours and mine. *We understand.*"

He had started saying it simply in order to have something to say, but as he spoke the words aloud he realized that they were true—or, at any rate, *nearly* true.

He had not been alone in the cellar; he had not panicked entirely on his own behalf. He had been scared for Steven too. He had been *right* to be scared for Steven, to panic for Steven, to go to the limit . . . for Steven. Whatever his co-parents thought of him, he'd done what he had to do, and he didn't have to apologize to anyone.

Steven spat out the teat, and gathered himself for a whimper, which would inevitably turn into a whine, which would turn into a. . . .

Rick stood up, and took the baby and the bottle into the nursery, hoping that the sight of familiar surroundings would help to set Steven's mind at rest. A dozen roses had been picked and taken away, but there were hundreds left; not one of them looked sick.

"Look," Rick murmured into the baby's ear. "Look at all the beautiful roses. Everything's okay."

He tried to push the teat back into the baby's mouth, but Steven resisted. The baby was crying now—building up yet again toward that frightful note.

"At the end of the day," Rick went on, stubbornly, "Murgatroyd *was*

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right, wasn't he? We just have to stop thinking about it as a disaster, and start thinking about it as a beginning, don't we? A miracle happened here today, and you and I were here to see it. We should be grateful for that. We *are* grateful for that. Aren't we?"

Again, he had said it just to have something to say, but again he realized that it was true. As Steven began to yell, and the pitch of his yelling cut through to the very heart of him, Rick suddenly realized that it would not and could not affect him the way it did unless there was some special bond between them, some indefinable but unique harmony. If one only looked at it sensibly it was not, after all, some malevolent worm gnawing at his soul, but an affirmation of the fact that they meant something to one another . . . that they had an understanding.

Rick pressed the makeshift teat into the baby's mouth, gently but insistently fighting the baby's refusal to make it welcome.

"Take your time, son," said Rick, soothingly. "Take your time. There's no hurry at all. We have all the time in the world, if we need it . . .all the time in the world."

And he looked around, at all the beautiful roses—all the bright pink roses which, with tender loving care and a little luck, would live for centuries.

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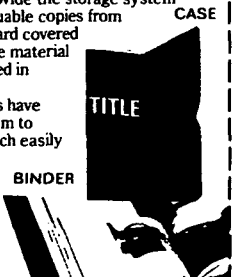

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Red Genesis, S. C. Sykes, Bantam Spectra, $4.99.

Spirit Crossings, Claudia A. Peck, Bantam Spectra, $4.50

ROBERT A. Heinlein is alive and well, I don't care what anybody says. This is not just due to the appearance of S. C. Sykes' *Red Genesis*, which serves merely as an example of that and other things. The fact is, there are obvious Heinlein imitations coming at us from all quarters, all the time now. None, of course, bears the mark of genius, which most Heinleins did one way or the other. (And no matter if you read the first-published version or, in the fullness of time, were treated to the versions based on the original manuscript.) So the first in a series of questions is, "Granted none of them is brilliant, are some of them really good?"

Well, I can answer that swiftly and certainly in the case of the Sykes. Yes. Some of them are really good, and this is one of them. And in a little while we'll get around to reviewing the Sykes. But, first, here comes the next question: "Are any of them necessary?"

Ah. Well, maybe — and Bantam Spectra has, in fact, offered a positive if partial answer in the case of the Sykes, and we'll get to that, too. But, really — are any of them necessary?

This strikes me as a good question. We can dispose of the answer swiftly, in a way. Poul Anderson, years ago, answered the question "What is the use of a horse?" He replied: "To occupy the space that would otherwise be taken up by another horse." And the fact is, if it wasn't this book, it would be another, and it is not at all certain that the other book would be better than this book. (For that matter, it is not at all certain that this other book would not also be a Heinlein imitation.) But the question deserves a better reply than that.

And that reply is simply that yes, at least some of them are necessary if the writers perceive a gap in Heinlein — a t left uncrossed,

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an i left undotted. Unfortunately, in most cases Heinlein knew very well what he was doing; the t was left uncrossed deliberately because Heinlein knew it was not worth doing. Almost all of his imitators, especially* the intelligent ones, lack his perspicacity. So it is a rare book, indeed, which actually contributes to the discovery, via science fiction, of additional aspects of, say, the planet Mars. Heinlein, after all, visited there more than once; the chances of his overlooking anything major are not good.

The thing is — and one had better get this in; one sometimes forgets how swiftly the generations pass — Robert A. Heinlein did not write about *a* Mars. At every step of his career, the Mars he wrote about was astronomically correct as of that date, and the stories he set on it are therefore stories which could take place on *the* Mars. Or so most people believe, even making allowances for giant inhabitants which have yet to be discovered; the giant inhabitants may or may not exist (probably not), but they *could* exist. Robert Anson Heinlein did not just make things up.

And if we extend the various Mars stories of Robert A. Heinlein, we get a sketched-in picture of Mars the barren, Mars the terraformed-in-progress, and so forth.

A thing that is not pointed out about Heinlein often enough is that not only would he tell you a story, he would sketch in other stories, too. If you stop to think about them, they do exist, simply because his backgrounds were solid. You have to name the various characters who will take place in that story, and there you are; Mars moved out of orbit to assist with the terraforming; Mars sent out into interstellar space to avoid the Sun's going nova; alternatively, Mars, wrapped in a Dyson sphere around an incandescent Deimos and Phobos, hiding behind Jupiter as the Sun goes Bang. But you see now what I mean. Sprinkle in a few people, give them a political crisis based on some past crisis, and set them to spinning while another chunk of Mars' climatology or geology* or what have you goes by.

Well, as I was saying, in Heinlein's hands these were very good stuff, most of the time — they were surprising, unexpected stuff all of the time — because he was a genius. He was a crank, and his thought-processes got stranger and stranger, but that is nowhere near as important as the fact that he was a

* *Think about it.*

* *Aretology!*

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genius. And that we don't have enough of, by a very long shot. S. C. Sykes is only the latest in a long string of Heinlein imitators who are merely very bright, and write a book that is better organized than most Heinleins, and which will be forgotten while the Heinlein novels go into their hundredth printing. That said, we were going to tell you about Bantam Spectra's daring move . . . or, anyway, Bantam Spectra's move.

There are, as you may have suspected, two kinds of science fiction.* That is, science fiction which draws rather rigorously on what is actually known, and science fiction which for want of a better term is loose as a goose. As it happens, a lot of wooden, halting stuff gets published without respect to which of these kinds are being employed, and also a lot of soaring, elegant stuff gets published without respect to . . . etc.

Well, Bantam has decided to push the kind that draws rather rigorously from that which is known. (They are pushing other kinds too, of course.) And in aid of this, the Sykes is the first of a special series, in which the novel *per se* is bundled between, say, an Isaac Asimov introduction on the history of Mars from the viewpoint of livability, and then, when the novel is done, an essay by Eugene Mallove on the actual prospects of there eventually (or already) being life on Mars, terrestrial or extra-terrestrial in origin, in detail.

This is put together by Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc., under the umbrella title "The Next Wave," and away we go. Frankly, I wish Byron Preiss Visual Publications — Isn't it Byron Preiss Visual Productions? — would . . . Ah, Algis, why aggravate yourself when so much that would not be done in SF is done because of Byron Preiss?

All right. The Asimov intro is interesting, though I doubt, very much, that he had a chance to read either the Sykes or the Mallove. The Mallove is a shade too cute, although the bit about the Martian rocks was interesting. All in all, considered as a series (of one, at this writing), this strikes me as more noise than substance, in the sense that the Sykes was perfectly capable of standing on its own, and the Asimov and Mallove don't seem to lend anything in particular. But I

** Yes, I know that there are two kinds of people — those who divide everything into two kinds, and those who don't. For that matter, this footnote does not appear here for the first time ever, though it may be rephrased. But although the device is actually empty of all logic, it makes, occasionally, for an apt expository device. This is one of those times, as distinguished from times when it is not.*

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can see why Lou Aronica O.K.'d this project for Bantam, and perhaps it will show signs of more coordination in the future.

That leaves us only to review the book itself. And as you have no doubt tired of hearing, it's good.

It's the story of Graham Kuan Sinclair, raised from birth to be a member of Earth's ruling entrepreneurial class, and very sucessful at it, until a green cloud begins periodically surfacing from various locations under the sea. This cloud is deadly — it eventually kills millions — and Graham Sinclair is declared to be responsible for it. He doesn't even disclaim responsibility. (He really *is* the Heinlein ideal.) He didn't know about it, the cloud is actually the result of generations of waste dumpage, etc.; but, as he points out, *somebody's* got to take the blame, and through a complicated series of steps, he's it.

You would think nobody would know what to do with him, since the death penalty is outlawed. But quick as a wink he is banished forever to Mars, on which a few colonies are barely getting started. He can take nothing with him, he is forbidden to ever so much as hear news of Earth, and there is no chance of parole. He will spend the rest of his life on Mars.

And the rest of the book tells the story of a chunk of his life. He is about thirty-five when he first sets foot on Mars, and seventeen years later the story does not so much close as conclude one chapter, in a good way. In between, much happens, most of it in a straightforward, journalistic prose which does not get in the way, and sometimes rises appreciably to nice peaks of storytelling. I will not tell you what, but what happens is good in the end.

There are, of course, some glitches. At bottom, Sykes is not good at depicting character interactions; people start out being antagonistic, for instance, and wind up being friends, but the exact nature of this process is skimped. Heinlein would not have dropped that stitch. On the other hand, Sykes is very good at showing character development over time, so that Graham ages beautifully in this book. I think Heinlein did not do quite as well.

I think you will like the book just fine, if for no other reason; and there *are* other reasons, so you're pretty safe in Sykes' hands.

There is also an instance which seems very awkward — the "face" on Mars is touched on, but very gingerly, very clumsily, and never mentioned again. But it's the only such case, and I wonder if Byron Preiss did not actually introduce it, and Sykes got rid of it as soon as

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humanly possible.

And — in an instance of pure Heinlein imitation—one of the characters seems to be breeding for telepathy. It isn't needed, it doesn't seem to be doing any work, but it's in there. It skews the story, just as it did in Heinlein. The thing is, Heinlein probably believed some such thing *was* happening to the human race. (And he may have been right — not the point.) I don't think Sykes believes it. But he knows Heinlein worked this kind of thing into many of his stories.

And that's the ultimate difference. This *is* imitation Heinlein.

But we won't get any more of the original. And this will, really, come close.

And now for something completely different, for all that it comes from the same publisher. *Spirit Crossings*, by Claudia A. Peck, is the story of what happens when Andrew Jackson (not the original) buys a house in Greenback, Tennessee, with the intention of making it the first real home for his wife and two boys, while he takes up his new job as history teacher at the local high school.

But things immediately go wrong. For one thing, the house is haunted by the ghost of an old Cherokee, Broken Echo, who was done very wrong. (It doesn't quite bear on that aspect of the story, but the original Andrew Jackson set the Cherokees on the Trail of Tears.) For another, the cellar is haunted by something else. Then there's Larry Bryge, the neighbor boy — there's something wrong with him. And then our Andrew Jackson's family is killed in a car wreck on its way to join him, and he is left alone, bereft, with no one really but the Cherokee ghost . . . who is stealing his memories, and who is much friendlier when he is old, as distinguished from young, which he unfortunately becomes once every moon.

And so forth. In the end, things do resolve; in the middle, you wouldn't believe how complicated things become. I think this is a very interesting book, and in many ways a successful book. I wonder about a few things, not because I doubt them, particularly, but because they particularly arouse my curiosity:

Is it true that many, many Tennesseans have Cherokee blood in appreciable amounts?

Is it true that Andrew Jackson (the President) had no legitimate children?

Is it true that Loudon, Tennessee, has a store called Bogus Auto Parts?

I have known Claudia Peck for quite a few years now, in a way. I

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first ran across her as a student at Clarion East, and learned that she was a country schoolteacher in a school where it didn't matter if you had a certificate or not, under special circumstances. She was a big-boned young woman who spoke as if holding something back, as country women will, and she had started a good many novels, but finished none. She went back to the hill country, but one day she surfaced in Chicago, and then, a few years later, in Moscow, Idaho — where she had little if any contact with the indigenous writing group. I don't know exactly where she is now. But this is a good book, and I look forward to the next one.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Guess What! Mem Fox, ill. Vivienne Goodman (HBJ/Gulliver, HBJ ed. cloth, 28pp, children's picture book, $13.95)

WHEN I grew up, witches were black silhouettes that got pinned to the bulletin boards in school during Halloween season. We all knew there was no such thing as a witch *really*. Lately, people who actually believe in witches (i.e., Christian fundamentalists) have taken to getting very upset about using witch icons in the schools, and so outside of adult fantasy and a few daring YA novels, I haven't seen much about witches in years.

So imagine my delight when I saw Mem Fox's and Vivienne Goodman's gorgeous children's picture book, *Guess What!* The text is scant—as you expect in a picture book—but it has a strong attitude right from the first page: "Far away from here lives a crazy lady called Daisy O'Grady." The narrator then takes us through a guessing game about the nature of this strange woman—a playful gamelike reading experience.

But the real joy of the book is in the marvelously hyperrealistic art. Every illustration is lush with detail, and the style puts me in mind of a demented Norman Rockwell. And as fantasy, the author and illustrator don't back off from the fantasy or try to "normalize" witches (she's *not* just the lady next door!); yet they do humanize her and put the fun back into the whole idea. If you have a kid *and* a sense of humor *and* a fondness for the old "safe" witch of our childhood, this book will put you back in second grade again!

Beauty, Sheri S. Tepper (Doubleday/Foundation, cloth, 412pp)

I very much enjoyed Sheri S. Tepper's debut in our field, the True Game series and *Marianne, the Magus, and the Manticore*. Her more recent novels, however, seemed to be moving in a direction that didn't interest me much; I started reading each of them, then set it

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aside and never quite got around to it again. This is no sign that a book isn't excellent, of course, only a sign that whatever its faults or virtues, I'm simply not in the audience for it, and so, of course, I don't review it.

When *Beauty* arrived at my house, I almost set it aside from the start, but instead I opened it and discovered that *this* novel seems to have Tepper's old magic back in place. I was engaged in the story at once and, with only an occasional lull, cared very much what would happen next all the way through.

The title may well put you in mind of Robin McKinley's *Beauty* some dozen years ago, and like that novel, Tepper's is a retelling of an old fairytale — not "Beauty and the Beast" this time, but "Sleeping Beauty." Well, to be precise, it *includes* a retelling of that tale, along with a half dozen others! For Tepper's *Beauty* is a romp through a sort of meta-fairy tale, in which our hero, a girl whose *name* is Beauty, learns that she is half-fairy in parentage but all too human in the pathways of her life.

As with Tepper's True Game books, *Beauty* plays fast and loose with the boundary between science fiction and fantasy — a practice that I heartily approve of. For instance, Beauty is drawn at one point into the near future of the "real" world, where she sees the miserable last days of the human race on Earth. She also visits our immediate future — the next ten years or so —in which she sees our own culture and even attends an American college for a while.

Here is where the deepest — no, I'll go out on a limb and say the *only* — weakness in the novel comes in. Tepper is making a powerful point in her story about the purpose of life and the responsibility we have toward maintaining, not the illusion or the delusion of beauty in the world, but rather the reality of it. The story itself contains this point intrinsically and effectively; but Tepper does not trust us to get it. Instead, far too often, she abandons the narrative and in thinly disguised essays gives us what I can only describe as totally ineffective bombast. She reserves some of her harshest rhetoric for attacks on Christian fundamentalists, for instance, supposedly because of their arrogance in condemning people who believe differently from them — and yet she demonstrates in those very perorations exactly the same condemnatory, arrogant, anti-compassionate traits that she deplores in them.

She's hardly alone in this. I recently read *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, by Kirk-

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patrick Sale (Knopf), in which Sale spends a great deal of effort sneering at other historians and biographers of Columbus, and even *more* effort attacking Columbus himself for having been so stupid as to judge the native Americans by the cultural standards of 15th-century Europe. Of course, Sale is himself committing exactly the sin he condemns in Columbus — judging someone's actions, not by the standards of the culture he lived in, but by the standards of what is viewed as correct in Sale's own time.

Spare us from the smugness of people who cannot conceive that those who disagree with them might actually be decent and worthy human beings, or at least have some small shred of goodness in their hearts!

The worst irony, for me, in facing this flaw in Tepper's otherwise excellent novel is that with only the most minor of exceptions, I agree with her views completely! I don't loathe her preachments because I disagree with them — I loathe them because they are so mean-spirited and so inappropriate to the character of Beauty as she is otherwise revealed in the book. To me, at least, it feels as if the author repeatedly takes her wonderful, vivid narrator by the shoulders, muscles her out of the way, and screams at the reader. It feels, in short, like being chewed out for something I didn't do. I've never liked that.

Clearly I feel strongly about this; so you should believe me when I tell you that this story is *so* good —so truthful, so entertaining, so moving — that it overcomes even the curse of metastasized political correctness. When she isn't in her pulpit, Tepper is a wise and compassionate narrator, and when it comes to spinning a yarn that you don't ever want to stop reading, there are few better spinners than she is. If at times you prick yourself on the spindle, well . . . I can guarantee you, at least you won't fall asleep!

The Sky Lords, John Brosnan (St. Martin's, cloth, 318pp, $18.95)

If you're one of those contrary people — like me — who wish for an intelligent sf adventure novel, one with intriguingly eccentric yet believable characters, moving through a deeply imagined milieu, with a story so gripping that it has you turning pages faster than light, then have I got a book for you. Best of all, while John Brosnan's *The Sky Lords* is the first of at least two books, and possibly more, *this volume has an ending.* All the major threads that were woven throughout the book are resolved, one way or another, by the end. Yet there's

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certainly room for more stories in volumes yet to come.

Our hero, Jan, is a young warrior in a village that is a remnant of a larger feminist state in an America that broke up centuries before. Though all her people have been genetically enhanced (or, in the case of males, tamed), they now reject the "science of men" and worship a sort of nature goddess. A bad harvest and the constant struggle with horrible fungi left over from the long-past gene wars have put them on the edge of destruction, and now the Sky Lord is coming —a huge lighter-than-air floating city that demands an annual tribute of foodstuffs that *this* year will put them over the edge into famine. Some want to try to reason with Lord Pangborn; others, led by Jan's mother, Melissa, want to use man-science to rebel against him.

In the course of this novel, like any good Heinlein adventure hero, Jan finds herself cast hither and yon by the events of the story, and along the way she meets colorful characters — most notably Milo, a slave in the skyship who nevertheless has remarkable talents that save Jan's life more than once. Having been raised in a culture where "true love" is only possible between women, Jan resists his advances at first out of prejudice; later, she has ample reason not to long for his amorous companionship. Their relationship remains sexually charged — as is the whole book, actually — and when it ends, brutally and permanently, it is almost a relief to the reader.

The book is far from perfect. Though Brosnan is an experienced writer of nonfiction, this is his first novel, and he repeatedly makes the very amateurish mistake of leading up to a pivotal scene, then skipping *past* it, to leave us wondering what happened — until he grudgingly fills in the information with flashbacks. This makes the book much weaker and flabbier than it should have been, and it is invariably a sign that the writer knows that the scene he's skipping will be very difficult to write well. Experienced writers learn that this means it is all the more important to write it directly and openly; novices tend to skip the hard scene because they don't trust themselves to do it properly. They might be right, of course — but that's no consolation to the reader, who is so frequently deprived of the best scenes. (The only exception I can think of is Irving's *Garp*, where the outcome of the car accident in the driveway is withheld for one long, excruciating, unbearable chapter — but Irving knew when, how, and why to break the rules, and Brosnan definitely does not.)

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There's also just a touch of the main flaw I remember from David Palmer's *Emergence* years ago — just a bit too much reliance on fortunate accident for the hero's survival. But these are forgivable flaws, especially when they occur in a novel that is otherwise so very enjoyable.

Serpent Catch, Dave Wolverton (Bantam/Spectra, paper, 416pp $4.99)

I raved about Dave Wolverton's first novel, *On My Way to Paradise*, and I've got to warn you: Apparently I'm a full-fledged member of Wolverton's "ideal audience," because I'm hard-pressed to tell you anything negative about his second. He touches the themes I care most about, yes, but more important yet, this man can create characters and dilemmas, worlds and societies that come alive for me and become an indelible part of my memory. I suppose that if you *aren't* as deeply touched by these things you may wonder why Card gets so excited about Wolverton's books, and like any reviewer I must remain aware that there may be others who disagree with my assessment. But dammitall, folks, in my humble opinion *Serpent Catch* is a masterwork of the first rank.

On a world that was meant to be a sort of planetwide zoo, with one continent devoted to dinosaurs and another to pre-ice age monster-size mammals, several intelligent races have been forced by alien prison wardens to live out their lives with no hope of the advances that science and high technology can bring. The intelligent species are dominated by Homo sapiens and Homo neanderthalensis, and the central dilemma and the great strength of Wolverton's novel is the relationship between the emotional, nonlinear neanderthals — the Pwi — and the rational but power-loving Humans. It may bother some readers for a while that the Pwi seem remarkably rational for such an "emotional" people, but fairly late in the story we learn that this is because there is no such thing as a "pure" Pwi or a "pure" human anymore — for reasons that make perfect sense within the tale.

At the start of the story we find that the world is on the brink of disaster: The mechanisms that the designers of the "zoo" established to keep the dinosaurs on their own continent are breaking down; in the meantime, the slave-owning kingdom of Craal is on the march, determined to take control of the last free peoples in the world. Our heros are not trying to stop the Craal — that would be far beyond their power. But they *are* trying to do something that seems almost as

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impossible — to steal infant water serpents from under the noses of the Craal and "seed" them in the ocean near their home, where they can resume their work of killing any dinosaurs who try to cross the ocean barrier.

In many ways, this science fiction novel feels like the best sort of fantasy quest, with a team of intrepid travelers, led at times by an immortal god-figure, discovering wonders and facing grave dangers along the way. It is also profoundly concerned with the way humans are controlled by — but sometimes transcend — their desires, and a good number of the male characters spend a considerable portion of the quest thinking almost exclusively about sex, which makes this the most realistic of quest novels!

By the end, without being beaten over the head about it, you will have been brought face to face with some of the greatest questions in literature: The nature of freedom, the meaning of human life, how power in human society is acquired and used. Yet you barely have to notice that the philosophical issues are under discussion, for this story grips you tightly and holds you through every page. It's hard to imagine that you would like many — certainly not most — of the characters; but you will understand them and, therefore, love them, even the most unlovable of them, even the ones whose actions you think are hopelessly, irredeemably wrong. That may be what I like best about Wolverton's work, even as I fail completely to understand how he does it: Wolverton does not require you to agree with his opinions in order to care about and believe in his world, his people, and his tale.

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Lynn S. Hightower's story in F&SF earlier this year, "The Rose Elf," received a lot of good critical attention. She has also sold short stories to Pulphouse, *and she has a novel forthcoming. "Journal of the First Voyage" is another story about children: this one focuses on the relationship between a famous father and his illegitimate son. It also examines the way people treat children — their own, and someone else's.*

Journal of the First Voyage

By Lynn S. Hightower

That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain. . . .
— Hamlet, Act I

MY FATHER IS not like other men. He has a soul full of visions, but no heart at all. I began by disliking him, but it was a mild thing — not hate, not then, or so I recall. Many fathers have no particular affection for their bastard children, and he kept my mother well enough.

One thing I will say for my father, Cristóbal Colón: he never suffered the chasms of the soul that most men endure. He always knew what he wanted, and always knew he would get it. He also knew things he should not. I used to think him mad.

Until I met the angels.

I was hiding back of the stables in an alley—a bad alley, even for this part of town. The mud ran slimy, a mix of river water, trash, and worse—all that

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the city had to offer. It was raining in small, drizzly fits, and the usual musk of horse and urine was overpowered by the stench from the carcass of a rotting dog.

A sign of prosperity, that dead dog. No one wanted the meat, save the rats. I have eaten dog myself — and rat, for that matter — though never the meat of the *Canabilli*. But my country stays on the sharp edge of hunger, and it happens, it happens. I wonder sometimes if my father indulged, at some low time in his life. The sinner likes to point, so my sister used to say.

My sister. Magdalena was the reason I crouched behind that stable, waiting for a chance to steal a horse. Only minutes ago I had gotten her message —"Come, Mano, life and death." The church had pointed a finger, and she was in mortal danger.

My father was the farthest thing from my mind.

The angels looked like men in dark cloaks, and I worried they had come to rob me. For my sins, I was considering returning the favor. But only for the quiver of time it took for me to really look.

There were no bright lights around them, no singing, no halos, no heartbeat of wings. But the hair stirred on the back of my neck, and the very air hummed. I had the sense of something not right on the earth.

The angels stood and watched me. They were so very tall, straight, and assured.

"I am told you are called Colón?"

I was not sure which one of them said it. The one in the gray cloak, I think.

I tried to speak, but did not manage it. I tried again.

"And so?"

"Cristóbal Colón?"

"Ah. It is my father you want, not me." It almost made sense. Anything odd would turn him up.

The angel in the black cloak made a noise. "It's you that's here, and I'm short on time. Where is your father now?"

A female. Her accents were strange, and I had to make her repeat the question. She threw back her hood and showed me the face of an irritable, gray-headed woman.

I felt something like disappointment.

"Where did you say he was?" Her voice was sharp, as if she read my thoughts.

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"I didn't say; I do not know."

"He's *supposed* to be here. It's important. Any chance you could bring him here fast?"

I glanced over my shoulder. "I do not know where he is."

The black angel considered me for a moment. "Do you love and honor your father?"

Did angels read lies?

I shrugged. "He is my father."

The black angel stepped close and grabbed my right arm. "Who do you think I am, young Colón?"

"I . . . think you an angel of God."

"And do you fear your God?"

I bowed my head. The stink of fear was on me.

"Listen to me, young Colón. Your father has been called to paradise. Do you understand? Paradise. But he will never see it, and because of that, he will set a misery in motion that will go on for hundreds of years. The black legend," she muttered. "Do you hear what I tell you? So he must see it; he must find paradise."

The angel pulled a thin yellow wafer from her sleeve. It looked dull and rich, and I knew gold when I saw it.

"Hurry," the gray-cloaked one said.

"You give this to him." The black angel looked at me hard. "Find your father and give it to him. Then you tell him to put this wafer in his mouth. Is that clear?"

"Clear?"

"You *understand*? You'll do it?"

"Yes. Yes, I swear, I'll do it."

The angel was quiet a moment. She looked in my face, and she read my soul.

"Hold out your hand," she said. Something in her voice made me hesitate. "Hold out your hand, young Colón."

I stretched out a hand, obedient to the angel of the Lord.

The angel in gray hissed suddenly. He reached toward the black angel and snatched at her arm, and then my wrist caught fire.

I opened my mouth to scream, but no sound came out, and I fell backward. I did not feel the fall, though I think I hit my head. My severed hand landed in the mud, inches away from my cheek. I waved the stump of my wrist in the air. The crisped and blackened edges did not bleed.

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The gray angel bent over me. He seemed young, up close, and pale. He muttered over his shoulder at the black angel, something about shock and death alone. I jerked my head from side to side, to escape the pain, I suppose. I closed my eyes, so I could not see those slim, curled fingers, splayed in the mud by my head.

I had strong, capable hands, good for hard work, and cupping the white breasts of women.

The black angel picked up my severed hand. She held it high, like a priest with a chalice, and her eyes were pale and cold.

"Do as you are told," she said harshly. "Give your father the golden wafer, and see he takes it in his mouth. Do this, and I will reappear and restore your hand. Cross me, and I will return and take your other one."

The gray angel smeared something on the stump of my wrist, and the pain dimmed. The angel wiped his hands on the skirt of the cloak, then put a hand to the side of my neck.

"Such a world," he said, beneath his breath, then looked back over his shoulder. "Out of time."

The black one nodded, and tucked my hand inside her cloak. The angels walked away without another word, seeming to get smaller and smaller as they went.

Rain hit my face and ran down my neck. My hair was caked with mud. I was cold, deep cold, and trembling. I thought of my sister, and tried to get to my knees.

Voices brought my head up. I crawled toward the wall of the stable, with some confused notion, I think, to hide. The voices were familiar, and I caught a deep breath.

Someone had my shoulders and was dragging me up. I clenched my teeth, feeling the shame of tears in my eyes. My wrist throbbed, and I pulled away.

I heard the voice of my father.

"It *is* him. Mano? Diez, help me get him to his feet."

"He is drunk?"

"Too much coincidence, I think. Odd, this. But he does . . . my God. Mano, your hand. When did this happen?"

"Just. . . ." I gritted my teeth. "Just now."

"Just *now*? There is no blood. It—"

"It's *burned*, Papa." The hushed voice of Diez. "We best get him out of the rain."

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"Mano? Mano, look at me."

My father smacked my cheeks, and the sting of it brought me around. He stared at me with pale, cold eyes—eyes like those of the angel.

"Tell me, what is it happened here? Something. . . ." He smiled at me, and gentled his voice. "Tell me, Mano."

"I need a horse. Magdalena—the priest in her town, her husband—"

"Mano, *what* happened *here*?"

"Please—"

He shook me hard, my father did, and smiled his terrible smile. I shut my eyes and clasped the golden wafer in my only hand.

"Papa, he is hurt, and babbling. We must get him to a bed."

My father let go of me. "Do what you will. I cannot leave. I must be *here*, Diez, I cannot—"

The voices faded. I knew they spoke, but I made no sense of the words. I gritted my teeth and fumbled the wafer beneath my undershirt. It is the last thing I remember, though I learned later that my half brother Diez carried me to an inn, and left money to see that I was nursed. He even came back once, to see how I did. I believe that he saved my life.

And while I lay stuporous in that inn, Magdalena was burned at the stake. When I think of her now, I see flames in her hair, and the terrible smile of our father.

JOURNAL OF the first voyage.

That's what he wrote at the top of the logbook he kept—my father, the mighty sea captain, the man of visions and deeply held conviction.

It is Boyez who tells me what the logbook says. He is the only one of us who can read.

"You are sure?" I ask him.

He shrugs.

"So he plans other voyages." I scratch a bite on my shoulder.

"It is whispered in the taverns that Cristóbal Colón says the Indies have been given him by divine right. They say he swears he will return a rich man." Boyez slaps me hard on the back. "Come on now, Mano, and do as I say. We will pretend you are a sailor." Boyez points, and I move.

It is Friday, and we are leaving. The golden wafer is sewn into my clothes. Sometimes I think I will give it to my father, and sometimes I

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think I may not. Magdalena has burned at the stake, and I have lost a hand, and both can be laid to the account of this selfish, cold father of mine. Does such a man deserve paradise?

My father has seen me in the crew. We are a curious mix of land-loving sailors—men, like my father, with too little experience of the sea. The water laps at the hull of the nao, which we call "Dirty Mary," though my father will have none of that name. Boyez tells me he heard the fleet marshall call it the *Santa María*. My father's doing, no doubt. He is pious as well as cruel, two things that go well together.

We leave before dawn. I begin to get my first inkling that perhaps I was born to sail. The caravels are ahead—smaller than our nao, sleek and fast, their sails just going up, as we slip away from Andalusia. The sun comes up as we catch the ebb tide out to the Gulf of Cádiz. It will be hot today, but for now the *terral* dries the sweat on my neck, and flaps the cuff of my shirt where my right hand should be.

Martín Alonso Pinzón is in the lead. He captains the *Pinta*, as my father calls it, though it is *Puta*, or "Painted One," to us. Martín Alonso's brother, Vicente Yáñez, is captain of the "Little Girl." Excuse me, my father. Captain of the *Niña*.

Martín Pinzón has the best men—he is experienced and well liked, and the only reason we have any crew at all. He is also rich. Were it not for him, we would likely never have made this voyage.

I thought my father might be angry to find me in the crew. I catch him looking speculatively at my stumpy right wrist, but other than that, I do not seem to interest him. Someday I will ask him how long he waited in that alley, but for now I am content to watch. He stands on deck and smiles and smiles, and his eyes are very cold. I do not know if what he sees pleases him; his focus seems to me inward, rather than out. But for all of his visions and holy intent, it is I who have seen the angels, and it will be I who delivers the shining Eucharist, if I so decide.

So smile all you want, my father. Because I, too, am smiling.

My father's knack for plotting our route seems more than can be accounted to luck. At the end of each day, he tells us how many leagues we have gone. It sounds well to me, but what do I know? Boyez, who is an experienced hand, says he thinks we are moving faster. He does not understand why the captain general would lie—the sooner we get there, the better, eh?—but he does not know Cristóbal Colón as I do. My father

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lies like he breathes—easily, with no special intent. Knowledge for him is power. And power is not to be shared.

Eight days out, the compasses behave oddly, and no longer seem to point north. Boyez sits shivering on the deck, though the heat scorches our shoulders. I catch a flea against my stomach, and slice it in half with my thumbnail. We are quiet, all of us. My father paces fore and aft, and licks his lips. His eyes dart among us, and he smiles cold, hard reassurance.

I feel myself growing tense.

"The compass," my father says, "is working as it should. It would appear, I think, that the star is moving"—he points upward—"like the other stars do, and the compass still points true."

How does he know such things, my father?

We are seeing signs of land. A whale, some weeds, and birds who should not be far out to sea. And yet, no actual sighting occurs, and we sail on and on. Perhaps we will not find land at all, until I give my father his wafer of gold.

I see the outline of the black angel in every shadow, and at night I lie awake.

The tiger cat has come into my lap, and Gomez is running toward me. He reaches for the cat, but the animal claws and hisses.

I shove Gomez away.

"What is it with you?" I ask him. "What do you want with the cat, eh?"

"Looking to wring his neck is what; he's gone off with my luck charm."

I hold up the cat. "By all means, then, we will search him."

Two of the men are laughing. The cat meows throatily and skitters his hind legs. I settle the cat in my lap.

"I saw him with it," Gomez says, mouth turning down. "He has hidden it somewhere on the ship."

"Talk, cat," I say. The cat meows again, which makes the men laugh even louder. "There," I say. "He confesses. What more do you ask of a cat?"

Gomez curses and does not smile.

"What is it with him?" I ask.

Boyez shakes his head. "Three weeks out, and no land. I have never sailed so long without port."

"But the signs—"

"The captain general makes no sense. Whales do not mean land. I do not understand why he says so."

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Malóre leans close. "I hear the captain general is preparing charts, to send across to Martîn Pinzón."

Boyez looks relieved. "Pinzón knows what he is doing. I would like to hear his word on the matter."

But several nights later, we do find land. My father looks out in the darkness and shouts. No one else sees, not even Gomez, whose eyes are accorded the best. But no one doubts the captain general. And two hours after midnight, the *Pinta*'s cannon goes off, and the cry of *tierra* goes up. Relief flows through us like wine.

Landfall. We are two leagues out. We anchor till dawn, though none of us sleep.

In the morning my father sets out for shore. I sit on deck and watch the longboat, the cat asleep in my lap. This cat has taken a liking to me, and brought me half a mouse. He has brought me the bottom part, and I wonder if it is the best bit, or if he has taken the good for himself. My experience with rat tells me I have been honored, but who knows the mind of a cat?

I would give a lot to be in the longboat. The royal banner whips in the wind, and I see the captains' flags flying in the green cross. My father has left with official observers, an interpreter, and armed guards.

I do not qualify for that last, thanks to my hand.

THE ISLANDS are unlike anything I have ever seen before — so green, and so thickly forested, that I feel closed-in and afraid. There are birds in rainbow feathers, and the sea is green and clear. It would take armies of men to clear and tame this savage lush of land.

And so. Cristóbal Colón has found paradise without my help, and now he looks for gold. I lie awake at night, and my fingers burn, fingers I no longer have. Was the angel wrong? The golden wafer is cold on my chest, and I wait to lose my other hand.

These worries do not kill my hunger. Our supplies are running low, and there is nothing to eat here but what the natives fish, and various odd-looking vegetables. These we do not eat, as they are poison to white men.

The Indians go about naked. They are quite beautiful, and very clean. The women have hair like silk, and voices that sing. Their homes are

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round and airy, and they keep them scoured and smelling sweet.

But they are like beasts, these people—trusting, willing to share whatever they have, their desire to please like that of small children. They have no iron, and they give my father every bit of their gold, as if it were nothing to them. Too bad they have so little to give, though they tell of places where it runs in the water.

This fires the heart of my father. And in this, I am my father's son.

There is tension over the women. They go about with no clothes, and are lovely to see, but mostly resist our lovemaking. Perhaps they are being coy.

One of them in particular seems to like me. She is curious about my hand, and I am embarrassed. In my world of church-sanctioned mutilation, people distance themselves from such things. In any case, I do not have the words to explain.

I cannot pronounce her name, but she lets me call her Marie. She says she is a Taino. She calls me Maniki, not Mano, and her voice is sweet in my ears. She paints herself all over, and wants to paint my nose, which is red and peeling. I think she wants to make a joke of me. She is never serious, unless she is working on her jewelry. What she makes is really quite fine. Sometimes I find myself thinking I should take some home to Magdalena, and then I remember that Magdalena has no need of jewelry.

Tomorrow we will go and look for the rivers of gold. I am not ready to leave. Marie has let me fondle her sweet, round breasts, and I think I could soon go further.

But my father is restless and full of business. He goes from island to island, claiming the land. Yesterday was a glut of flag waving and name making, all dutifully recorded by Escobedo, who goes nowhere without parchment, inkpot, and quill.

My father is angry because Martîn Pinzón has gone off on his own. Will Pinzón find the rivers of gold? I wonder if this is what the wafer is for—the finding of gold. Is gold what the angel meant by paradise?

In the morning, Marie wakes me at dawn. We go down to the water's edge, enjoying the air while it is cool, and Marie offers me fruit. But I've made up my mind, and my stomach is tight, and I do not want any food.

I use my knife to cut the wafer from beneath my shirt. My heart beats hard, and I sweat. I am convinced that the angel sent the wafer to help my father find gold, and I would give my other hand to keep it out of his.

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The wafer melts sweet on my tongue.

Nothing happens, and my shoulders sag. The wafer will not work for a bastard son. I take a breath, and Marie hands me fruit, which I hold but do not eat.

And then I hear voices in my head—talking and singing too loud. I scream and grab my temples. Marie cries and pulls me away from the water. She guides me to a shady spot under the trees. I close my eyes, but the voices whisper in my mind and fill my head. I shake my head and thrash my arms, but the voices will not go away.

Marie is holding my hand. She bathes my head with water, and it is distracting somehow, but I cannot find the voice to tell her to stop. I am sweating and trying to crawl. No use, this hiding away. The angel is coming to take my hand.

Ah God, I am sorry, sorry, sorry. This torture was meant for my father, not for me.

The black angel did not come. For two days I lay under the tree, while voices filled my head.

I am not the man I was.

I have new eyes now, and understand, at last, what the black angel meant. A blind man cannot see paradise, even when he is there.

I need to speak with my father.

I have three miles to walk, but my time is happily spent. The forest does not oppress me now—it is like a weight off my chest. I feel strong *querencia* here, as if this were my home. On this island, my soul can breathe.

And I can talk to Marie now; her words make sense. I will even try strange fruits.

My father's cabin is small, with a window on each side. He can touch both walls as he sits. He frowns and motions me in, and does not offer a chair.

"I have been given a vision," I say.

He says nothing for a long while. But he is impatient, my father.

"What kind of a vision?"

"A vision of . . . paradise."

He cocks his head sideways. "Go on. From where does this vision come?"

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"From . . . angels. Do you remember the night that you found me in the alley?"

He narrows his eyes. His face is quite ruddy, but it gets redder still. His beard is thick and white, and so is his hair. He is a striking man, though he must be at least forty.

"I remember."

"I lied to you. About being robbed. I was visited by the black and gray angels, who said they were looking for you."

My father's face is hard to read. He leans back in his chair.

I swallow. "They gave me something for you."

"*What?*"

"A wafer of gold. They said you were to take it in your mouth, and then you would find what you should."

My father leans close. "Would a son poison his father?" He seems to be thinking out loud. "He is a bastard son. Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"I took the wafer myself, two days ago."

"But why?"

"I thought it might help me find gold."

My father smiles, but it is not friendly. "And did it?"

"No."

"Well, then. That's all to be said." He waves me away, smiling his disbelief.

"But that is not all. The wafer has given me the voices of angels, and shown me what *you* need to see. You must understand what paradise is. You must see that *this* is paradise, this island, Heaven on earth, *here*. These people—"

He waves a hand again, frowning. "Believe it or not, Mano Colón, my children are important to me. Even the wrong-side-of-blanket ones. And I am glad you have made this voyage with me. I have not given you much, have I young Mano? And a father should see to his sons. I tell you honestly, I have great affection for your mother and your sister."

I flinch and tighten my fist. Does he not know Magdalena is dead?

"You are right, Mano, to try to come to my notice. But these stories of angels. . . ."

"I can understand their language."

"Who?" He snorts. "The angels?"

"The savages. The Taino—that is what they call themselves."

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"So this vision of angels has got you their language?"

I nod.

My father gets up from his chair and leans against the wall. He seems too big for this small, tight space. He moves, suddenly, and sticks his head out of the cabin, yelling for Gomez to bring the Taino boy who stays on the ship in the day. My father sits back in his chair and regards me shrewdly.

I cannot find the words to tell him what is in my mind.

Gomez enters, finally, bringing the Taino boy.

"Talk to him," my father says, his voice suddenly harsh.

I look at the boy. "Your name?"

The boy's eyes widen, and he smiles suddenly, charmingly. "You can talk!" He turns at once to my father. "And you? Have you learned to talk?"

My father frowns. The boy turns to me again.

"Your words are good, but you must say it like this—eh, *eh*, try that."

"Eh."

"Yes. Yes. My name is Kal. And you are?"

"Mano Colón."

"Explain, please, why—"

"Enough." My father's voice can cut. He orders Gomez to leave and take the boy away. Gomez stares at me, and Kal looks puzzled, but gives me a small smile as he goes.

My father is watching me closely. "Well, my son, I have use for you now." He thinks, and smiles, and folds his arms. "We will leave with the tides tomorrow. So tonight I want you to go out and get me seven head of these natives. Four women, I think, and three children. See that the children are not too young. They should be of an age to walk."

I stare at him for a long time, and he favors me with that hard, cold smile.

That night I warn Marie. I lie awake in the dark and wonder what will happen in the morning, when I do not bring my father his consignment of slaves. It is a bad way to spend Christmas Eve.

I need not have worried. Sometime in the night, the *Santa María* runs aground on the rocks, and by morning it is sunk.

THE VOYAGE is going sour. The mood has changed with the sinking of the nao, and the men are nervous and tired. We are down to two ships now, and must leave men behind in a fortress christened La Navidad. Before we sail, my father shoots off the

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cannons, into what is left of the *Santa María.* The Taino hit the sand wailing, and I see my father's smile. He has proved his machismo now to these people who have freely given food, shelter, and gold. A brave man, my father.

But I am his son, and he favors me now. I am piloting the longboat, while my father sits safe on the *Niña* and waits for a new consignment of slaves.

The *Niña* is anchored some two hundred miles east of La Navidad, lurking as we guide the longboat into a narrow bay. The Taino that approach us have bows and arrows, but seem friendly enough. My men are watchful and tense.

"Good morning," I say to the Taino.

They look from one to the other.

"Good morning." A young male with hair over his eyebrows steps closer. "You understand our words?"

I nod. "We would like to buy from you the bows and arrows." It is my father's standing order to barter away any weaponry.

The Taino talk among themselves, and ask me what I will give.

I hold up a string of little bells. The Taino smile and laugh. I wonder, suddenly, which of us is more childlike—me, for offering such a thing, or them, for being interested.

The young man holds up his bow. "How many?"

"All that you have." I jingle the bells. "I have many strings of these, as well as other things you may like."

"Give us a moment."

They head for the trees, and Gomez begins to mutter. I am missing Marie. I should be paying attention to Gomez.

The Taino come back, running eagerly, arms full of weapons.

"Treachery!" Gomez shouts. He draws his sword.

"The weapons are for trading!" I yell.

I am too late. Gomez hacks deeply into the arm of one young Taino, and blood runs dark in the sand.

Boyez lifts a halberd, but I shove him back. Someone lets fly with a crossbow. Another boy screams and falls. The Taino drag the wounded back into the trees.

My face is hot, and my throat aches from yelling. Another arrow sails past. I land on Boyez and throw him to the ground.

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"They come to trade," I tell him. "*To trade.*"

Boyez relaxes under my grip. I catch my breath and look up. The Taino have disappeared.

"Go after the bastards!" Gomez screams. "Show them real men and real weapons."

I put my sword to his throat and imagine his blood on my blade. "The first man does so is dead."

The men stare, but make no move. They do not understand the reason, but they read my intent. I feel their relief and their fear.

Boyez puts a hand on my shoulder.

"We should go," he says. "Back to the ship."

"I am not going back."

"What? You are joking?"

"No."

"But I do not understand."

"That is one thing not likely to change." I put my hand on his arm. "Tell my father to sail home without me."

He shakes his head, and I think he may try force, but he shrugs.

"I have seen this before. I think the women are the cause." He sighs deeply. "So. Good-bye, Manolito. I will think of *something* to tell the captain general."

"Good-bye, Boyez."

The men settle back in the boat and push off. They stare, and I wave them away.

I do not regret not going back with the longboat, and my father does not come looking. As soon as the boat is well and gone, I go straight for the woods, and the Taino. It is a risk, staying behind, and I half-expect to be killed.

They do not kill me, but I am grateful that I speak their words.

I help nurse the boy wounded by the crossbow. His name is Rahd, and he becomes my brother. When he is well, he teaches me to fish and to farm. And I learn to like *yuca*, and *batata*, and the squash and beans, and to plant them myself in mounds to my knees. For a few hours of work each week, the mounds will yield food year round.

I soon have time on my hands.

I take to going barefoot and leaving off my shirt. I paint my chest, to ward off the worst of the sun.

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In time I become a husband.

My wife, Crishda, is a small and noisy girl, with the energy of ten little children. We spend much time exploring the land, and sleeping outside at night. We even find gold. I cannot explain to my wife why that makes me laugh.

And when Crishda breeds, and swells with child, Rahd helps me build a hut. We make a circle of cane poles, driving them deeply and closely together, so the hut can ride the killer storms.

The days slip by quickly. I learn to play ball, and am a champion, one-handed though I am. Crishda's belly grows huge and firm. I hope for a girl baby to name Magdalena. And I hope never to see my father again.

One night, Rahd appears at our window. We are finishing one of the huge dinners Crishda demands now that she breeds. Rahd comes in, but will not eat.

"I have news," he says, "of your father."

I set the basket I hold by the wall.

"He's back?"

"Oh yes. He's back."

"Where?"

"La Navidad. I got this from Benai. Your father has been back for two days. He has many ships now. Many ships."

I say nothing.

"He will be angry," Rahd says, frowning deeply.

I nod my head. I know that he is thinking of La Navidad.

I had led the raid that killed those men, all my fine old comrades. The sailors had taken five women apiece, and even the Taino have limits. The Taino living close to La Navidad are haunted by that raid. Some see the ghosts of headless sailors.

Perhaps they do. It does not worry me. Ghosts do not rape women.

"Get some men together," I tell Rahd. "We will leave at dawn with the tide."

He nods and goes away.

Crishda rubs my shoulder. "I would go with you, my Mano."

I pat her hard, round belly. She puts her hand over mine and lays her head on my shoulder. Our baby kicks beneath my fingers, and Crishda squeezes my hand.

Paradise.

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Eight of us leave with the tide the next morning, in a *canoa* Rahd has carved from a silk-cotton tree. As we push into the emerald-green water, I see Crishda back in the trees.

"Please explain this to me." Rahd is touching my shoulder. "It is said that when your father's men landed, they clubbed eight seals who slept in the sand. I must understand the reason."

The sun is in my eyes, and I can no longer see Crishda. I turn to my friend and shrug. "No reason. There is no reason."

He shakes his head. "They kill them for no reason?"

"Because they are who they are."

"They do not eat them?"

"No."

He is quiet now, but he watches me. I know he is remembering the raid.

The winds are with us, and we make good time—four days on the open sea. After dark we beach the *canoa* and sleep for a while. The moon is good, and we wake before dawn. Rahd leads us through the trees.

It is high noon when we get to what is left of La Navidad. I curse my father under my breath.

Here is no struggling ragtag of three little boats. My father's ships ride the waves seventeen strong, armed and swarming with men. I see soldiers in armor, with halberds and swords, and the heavy brown robes of the priests. And I am cold, cold inside.

It is worse even than what I imagined. Women scream and run into the trees, leaving crying babes on the beach. Children stand alone and sobbing, with no one to pick them up and wipe their red running noses.

A longboat is leaving. It overflows with wailing Taino, and rides low in the surf. There is one more longboat to fill. Soldiers chase the Taino down and haul them away. Sometimes they kill the men.

All around me I hear the soldiers shout, *"Canabilli!"* And it makes a sort of sense. No sin in taking *Canabilli* as slaves. The Taino might be another matter.

And that, strangely enough, seems why they are here—to cram their boats with slaves. I should not be surprised, I suppose. My father is no stranger to the trade.

Rahd jumps into the water, and I catch my breath at his courage.

He is strong and fast and swims for the boat. The soldiers shoot him for

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sport. I count at least seven arrows, and flinch with every hit. And still my brother swims. They haul Rahd in, with laughter and shouts, tying ropes round his hands and feet. He is slippery wet, and fights like a shark, but they bind him and hold him high.

As they toss him from the boat, I can see he has been gutted, and his entrails hang from his sides.

And still Rahd swims, thrashing like mad, till an arrow finds his throat. He sinks then, and I breathe again, almost relieved he is dead.

I am asking my God for forgiveness as I run along this beach.

I pick up as many babies as I can carry, and swear I'll be back for the rest. The soldiers have their last boat full, and seem not to care what I do. I call to the children to follow me, so I can hide them in the woods, but they are all too frightened to move.

I talk to them in words that they know, and try to look friendly and calm. They come at last, and I lead them away. They are stunned and eerily quiet.

And it comes to me, as we disappear behind the trees, that I tried to steal paradise from my father, but took it from the children instead.

"I wish I could be more encouraging, but you just don't have the leadership potential we're looking for."

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Ellen Kushner's fantasies usually have a touch of history. Her most recent novel, Thomas the Rhymer, *is based on British folklore and balladry. "The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death" also has a historical feel. It returns to the world that Ellen created in her acclaimed first novel,* Swordspoint: A Melodrama of Manners (Tor Books). *And, fitting with our theme, this is a coming of age story — with a twist.*

The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death

By Ellen Kushner

AFTER THE FIGHT, Richard was thirsty. He decided to leave the parrots alone for now. Parrots were supposed to be unlucky for swordsmen. In this case the curse seemed to have fallen on his opponent. Curious, he had asked the wounded man, "Did you slam into me on purpose?" People did sometimes, to provoke a fight with Richard St. Vier, the master swordsman who wouldn't take challenges from just anyone. But the wounded man only pressed his white lips together. The rest of him looked green. Some people just couldn't take the sight of their own blood.

Richard realized he'd seen him before, in a Riverside bar. He was a tough named Jim — or Tim — Something. Not much of a swordsman; the sort of man who made his way in the lawless Riverside district on bravado, and

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earned his living in the city doing cheapjack sword jobs for merchants aping the nobility in their hiring of swordsmen.

A man with a wreath of fresias hanging precariously over one ear came stumbling up. "Oh Tim," he said mournfully. "Oh Tim, I told you that fancy claret was too much for you." He caught hold of the wounded man's arm, began hauling him to his feet. As a matched set, Richard recognized them: they'd been the ritual guards in the wedding procession he'd seen passing through the market square earlier that afternoon.

"Sorry," the flower-decked drunk said to St. Vier. "Tim didn't mean to give you trouble, you understand?" Tim groaned. "He's not used to claret, see."

"Don't worry about it," Richard said charitably. No wonder Tim's swordplay had been less than linear.

Over their heads the caged parrots started squawking again. The parrot lady climbed down from the box where she'd escaped to get a better view of the fight. With St. Vier there to back her up, she shook her apron at the two ruffians to shoo them as if they were chickens escaped from the yard. The children who'd surrounded them, first to see if the quiet man was going to buy a parrot so they could see one taken down, and then to watch the fight, laughed and shrieked and made chicken noises after the disappearing toughs.

But people made way for Richard St. Vier as he headed in the direction of a stall selling drinks. The parrot lady collared one of the street kids, saying, "See that? You can tell your grandchildren you saw St. Vier fight right here." Oh, honestly, Richard thought, it hadn't been much of a fight; more like bumping into someone on the street.

He leaned on the wooden counter, trying to decide what he wanted.

"Hey," said a young voice at his elbow. "I'll buy you a drink."

He thought it was a woman, from the voice. Women sometimes tried to pick him up after fights. But he glanced down and saw a pug-faced boy looking at him through slitted eyes, the way kids do when they're trying to look older than they are. This one wasn't very old. "That was real good, the way you did that," the boy said. "I mean the quick double feint and all."

"Thank you," the swordsman answered courteously. His mother had raised him with good manners, and some old habits cling, even in the big city. Sometimes he could almost hear her say, *Just because you can kill people whenever you want to doesn't mean you have a license to be rude to anyone.* He let the boy buy them both some fancy drink made with raspberries. They drank silently, the boy peering over the rim of his cup. It was good; Richard

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ordered them both another.

"Yeah," the kid said. "I think you're the best there is, you know?"

"Thanks," said the swordsman. He put some coins on the counter.

"Yeah." The kid self-consciously fingered the sword at his own side. "I fight too. I had this idea, see — if you needed a servant or something."

"I don't," the swordsman said.

"Well, you know," the boy went on anyway. "I could, like, make up the fire in the morning. Carry water. Cook you stuff. Maybe when you practice, I could be — if you need somebody to help you out a little —"

"No," said St. Vier. "Thank you. There are plenty of schools for you to learn in."

"Yeah, but they're not . . ."

"I know. But that's the way it is."

He walked away from the bar, not wanting to hear any more argument. Behind him the kid started to follow, then fell back.

Across the square he met his friend Alec. "You've been in a fight," Alec said. "I missed it," he added, faintly accusing.

"Someone slammed into me by the parrot cages. It was funny." Richard smiled now at the memory. "I didn't see him coming, and for a moment I thought it was an earthquake! Swords were out before he could apologize — if he meant to apologize. He was drunk."

"You didn't kill him," Alec said, as if he'd heard the story already.

"Not in this part of town. That doesn't go down too well with the Watch here."

"I hope you weren't thinking of getting a parrot again."

Richard grinned, falling into step beside his tall friend. It was a familiar argument. "They're so decorative, Alec. And you could teach it to talk."

"Let some bird steal all my best lines? Anyhow, they eat worms. *I'm* not getting up to catch worms."

"They eat bread and fruit. I asked this time."

"Too expensive."

They were passing through the nice section of the city, headed down to the wharves. On the other side of the river was the district called Riverside, where the swordsman lived with sharpsters and criminals, beyond reach of the law. It would not have been a safe place for a man like Alec, who barely knew one end of a knife from another; but the swordsman St. Vier had made it clear what would happen to anyone who touched his friend. Riverside

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tolerated eccentrics. The tall scholar, with his student slouch and aristocratic accent, was becoming a known quantity along with the master swordsman.

"If you're feeling like throwing your money around," Alec persisted, "why don't you get us a servant? You need someone to polish your boots."

"I take good care of my boots," Richard said, stung in an area of competence. "*You're* the one who needs it."

"Yes," Alec happily agreed. "I do. Someone to go to the market for us, and keep visitors away, and start the fire in winter, and bring us breakfast in bed. . ."

"Decadent," St. Vier said. "You can go to the market yourself. And I keep 'visitors' away just fine. I don't understand why you think it would be fun to have some stranger living with us. If you wanted that sort of life, you should have —" He stopped before he could say the unforgivable. But Alec, in one of his sudden shifts of attitude, which veered like the wind over a small pond, finished cheerfully for him, "I should have stayed on the Hill with my rich relatives. But they never kill people — not out in the open where we can all enjoy it, anyway. You're so much more entertaining. . . ."

Richard's lips quirked downward, unsuccessfully hiding a smile. "Loved only for my sword," he said.

Alec said carefully, "If I were the sort of person who makes crude jokes, you would be very embarrassed now."

Richard, who was never embarrassed, said, "What a good thing you're not. What do you want for dinner?"

THEY WENT to Rosalie's, where they ate stew in the cool underground tavern and talked business with their friends. It was the usual hodgepodge of fact and rumor. A new swordsman had appeared across town claiming to be a foreign champion, but someone's cousin in service had recognized him as Lord Averil's old valet, with fencing lessons and a dyed mustache. . . . Hugo Seville had finally gotten so low as to take a job offing some noble's wife . . . or maybe he'd only been offered it, or someone wished he had.

Nobles with jobs for St. Vier sent their messages to Rosalie's. But today there was nothing. "Just some nervous jerk looking for an heiress."

"Aren't we all!"

"Sorry, Reg, this one's taken; run off with some swordsman."

"Anyone we know?"

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"Naw . . . fairy-tale swordsman — they say all girls have run off with one, when it's really their father's clerk."

Big Missy, who worked the mattress trade at Glinley's, put her arm around Richard. "I could run off with a swordsman." Seated, he came up only to her bosom, which he leaned back into, smiling across to Alec, eyebrows raised a little provocatively.

Alec took the bait: "Careful," the tall scholar told her; "he bites."

"Oh?" Missy leered becomingly at him. "Don't *you*, pretty baby?"

Alec tried to hide a flush of pure delight. No one had ever called him "pretty baby" before, especially not women other people paid to get into.

"Of course I do," he said with all the brittle superciliousness he was master of. "Hard."

Missy released St. Vier, advancing on his tall young friend. "Oh *good* . . .," she breathed huskily. "I like 'em rough." Her huge arms pointed like weather vanes into the rising wind. "Come to me lover."

The old-time crowd at Rosalie's was ecstatic. "Missy, don't leave me for that bag of bones!" "So long, then, Alec; let us know how it comes out!" "Try it, boy; you just might like it!"

Alec looked like he wanted to sink into the floor. He held his ground, but his hauteur, already badly applied, was slipping treacherously.

At the last minute, Richard took pity on him. "I saw a wedding today," he said to the room at large.

"Oh yeah," said Lucie; "we heard you killed one of the guards. Finally made them earn their pay, huh?"

"Thought you didn't *do* weddings, Master St. Vier." Sam Bonner looked around for approval of his wit. Everyone knew that St. Vier disdained guard work.

"I don't," Richard said. "This was after. And I didn't kill him. Tim somebody."

"No lie! Tim Porker? Half-grown mustache, big ears? Said he hurt himself falling down some stairs. Dirty liar."

"No weddings for Richard," Alec said. He'd regained his aplomb, but was still eyeing Missy warily from across the room. "He is morally opposed to the buying and selling of heiresses."

"No, I'm not. It's just not interesting work, being a wedding guard. It doesn't mean anything anymore, just rich people showing they can afford swordsmen to make their procession look pretty. It's no —"

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"Challenge," Alec finished for him. "You know, we could set that to music, you say it so often, and hawk it on the street as a ballad. What a good thing for the rich that other swordsmen aren't too proud to take their money, or we'd never see an heiress safely bedded down. What's the reward offered for the runaway? Is there one? Or is she damaged goods already?"

"There's a reward for information. But you have to go Uptown to get it."

"I'm not above going Uptown," said Lucie haughtily; "I've been there before. But I don't know as I'd turn in a girl that's run away for love. . . ."

"Ohh," bawled Rosalie across the tavern;; "is that what you call it?"

"Speaking of money," Alec said, rattling the dicebox, "is anyone interested in a small bet on whether I can roll multiples of three three times running?"

Richard got up to go. When Alec had drunk enough to become interested in mathematical odds, the evening's entertainment was over for him. St. Vier was not a gambling man.

The Riverside streets were dark, but St. Vier knew his way between the close-set houses, past the place where the broken gutter overflowed, around the potholes of pried-up cobbles, through the back alleys and home. His own lodgings were in a cul-de-sac off the main street; part of an old townhouse, a discarded veteran of grander days. Richard lived on the second story, in what had once been the music rooms.

On the ground floor, Marie's rooms were dark. He stopped before the front door: in the recessed entryway, there was a flash of white. Cautiously St. Vier drew his sword and advanced.

A small woman practically flung herself onto his blade. "Oh help!" she cried shrilly. "You must help me!"

"Back off," said St. Vier. It was too dark to see much but her shape. She was wearing a heavy cloak, and something about her was very young. "What's the matter?"

"I am desperate," she gasped. "I am in terrible danger. Only you can help me! My enemies are everywhere. You must hide me."

"You're drunk," said Richard, although her accent wasn't Riverside. "Go away before you get hurt."

The woman fell back against the door. "No, please. It means my life."

"You had better go home," Richard said. To speed her on her way, he said, "Do you need me to escort you somewhere? Or shall I hire you a torch?"

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"No!" It sounded more annoyed than desperate, but quickly turned back to pleading: "I dare not go home. Please listen to me. I am—a Lady of Quality. My parents want to marry me to a man I hate — an old miser with bad breath and groping hands."

"That's too bad," Richard said politely, amused in spite of the inconvenience. "What do you want me to do about it? Do you want him killed?"

"Oh! Oh. No. Thank you. That is, I just need a place to stay. Until they stop looking for me."

Richard said, "Did you know there's a reward out for you?"

"There *is*?" she squeaked. "But—oh. How gratifying. How . . . like them."

"Come upstairs." St. Vier held the door open. "Mind the third step; it's broken. When Marie gets back, you can stay with her. She's a, she takes in customers, but I think propriety says you're better off with her than with me."

"But I'd *rather* stay with you, sir!"

In the pitch-black of the stairs, Richard halted. The girl almost stumbled into him. "No," St. Vier said. "If you're going to start that, you're not coming any farther."

"I didn't—" she squeaked, and began again: "That's not what I meant at all. Honestly."

Upstairs, he pushed open the door and lit a few candles. "Oh!" the girl gasped. "Is this—is this where you—"

"I practice in this room," he said. "The walls are wrecked. You can sit on that chaise, if you want—it's not as rickety as it looks." But the girl went over to the wall, touching the pockmarks where his practice sword had chipped holes in the old plaster. Her fingertips were gentle, almost reverent.

It was an old room, with traces of its former grandeur clinging about the edges in the form of gilded laurel-leaf molding and occasional pieces of cherub. The person who had last seen fresh paint there had long since turned to dust. The only efforts that its present occupants had made to decorate it were an expensive tapestry hung over the fireplace, and a couple of very detailed silver candlesticks, a few leather-bound books, and an enamel vase, scattered about the room in no discernible order.

"I'd offer you the bed," said Richard, "but it would annoy Alec. Just make yourself comfortable in here."

With the pleasantly light feeling of well-earned tiredness, the swordsman drifted into the room that held his big carven bed and his chests for clothes

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and swords, undoing the accoutrements of his trade: unbuckling the straps of his sword belt, slipping the knife sheath out of his vest. He paced the room, laying them down, unlacing and unpeeling his clothes, and got into bed. He was just falling asleep when he heard Alec's voice in the other room:

"Richard! You've found us a servant after all — how enterprising of you!"

"No—" he started to explain, and then thought he'd better get up to do it.

The girl was hunched up at the back of the chaise longue, looking awed and defenseless, her cloak still wrapped tight around her. Alec loomed over her, his usual untoward clutter of unruly limbs. Sometimes drinking made him graceful, but not tonight.

"Well," the girl was offering hopefully, "I can cook. Make up the fire. Carry water."

Richard thought, That's the second time I've heard that today. He started to say, "We couldn't ask a Lady of Quality—"

"Can you do boots?" Alec asked with interest.

"No," Richard stated firmly before she could say yes. "No servants."

"Well," Alec asked peevishly, "then what's she doing here? Not the obvious, I hope."

"Alec. Since when am I obvious?"

"Oh, never mind." Alec turned clumsily on his heel. "I'm going to bed. Have fun. See that there's hot shaving water in the morning."

Richard shrugged apologetically at the girl, who was staring after them in fascination. It was a shrug meaning, *Don't pay any attention to him;* but he couldn't help wondering if there would be hot water to shave with. Meanwhile, he meant to pay attention to Alec himself.

ALEC WOKE up unable to tell where his limbs left off and Richard's began. He heard Richard say, "This is embarrassing. Don't move, Alec, all right?"

A third person was in the room with them, standing over the bed with a drawn sword. "How did you get in here?" Richard asked.

The pug-faced boy said, "It was easy. Don't you recognize me? My enemies are everywhere. I think I should, you know, get some kind of prize for that, don't you? I mean, I tricked you, didn't I?"

St. Vier eased himself onto his elbows. "Which are you, an heiress disguised as a snotty brat, or a brat disguised as an heiress?"

"Or," Alec couldn't resist adding, "a boy disguised as a girl disguised as a

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boy?"

"It doesn't matter," St. Vier said. "Your grip is too tight."

"Oh—sorry." Still keeping the sword's point on target, the kid eased his grip. "Sorry—I'll work on it. I knew I'd never get in like this. And girls are safe with you; everyone knows you don't like girls."

"Oh no," Richard protested, surprised. "I like girls very much."

"Richard," drawled Alec, whose left leg was beginning to cramp, "you're breaking my heart."

"But you like *him* better."

"Well, yes, I do."

"Jealous?" Alec snarled sweetly. "Please die and go away. I'm going to have the world's worst hangover if I don't get back to sleep soon."

Richard said, "I don't teach. I can't explain how I do what I do."

"Please," said the boy with the sword. "Can't you just take a look at me? Tell me if I'm any good. If you say I'm good, I'll know."

"What if I say you're not?"

"I'm good," the kid said stiffly. "I've got to be."

Richard slid out of bed, in one fluid motion regathering his limbs to himself. Alec admired that — like watching a chess expert solve a check in one simple move. Richard was naked, polished as a sculpture in the moonlight. In his hand was the sword that had been there from the start.

"Defend yourself," St. Vier said, and the boy fell back in cautious *garde*.

"If you kill him," said Alec, hands comfortably behind his head, "try not to make it one of the messy ones."

"I'm *not*—going to *kill*—him." With what was, for him, atypical flashiness, Richard punctuated each word with a blow of steel on steel. At his words the boy rallied, and returned the strokes. "Again," snapped the swordsman, still attacking. There was no kindness in his voice. "We're going to repeat the whole sequence, if you can remember it. Parry all my thrusts this time."

Sometimes the boy caught the quick-darting strokes, and sometimes his eye or his memory failed, and the blade stopped an inch from his heart, death suspended by the swordsman's will.

"New sequence," Richard rapped out. "Learn it."

They repeated the moves. Alec thought the boy was getting better, more assured. Then the swordsman struck hard on the boy's blade, and the sword flew out of his pupil's hand, clanging on the floor, rolled into a corner. "I told you your grip was too tight. Go get it."

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The boy retrieved his sword, and the lesson resumed. Alex began to be bored by the endless repetition. "Your arm's getting tired," St. Vier observed. "Don't you practice with weights?"

"Don't have—any weights."

"Get some. No, don't stop. In a real fight, you can't stop."

"A real fight—wouldn't go on this long."

"How do you know? Been in any?"

"Yes. One. —*Two.*"

"You won both," Richard said coldly, his arm never resting, his feet never still. "Makes you think you're a hero of the field. *Pay attention.*" He rapped sharply on the blade. "Keep going." The boy countered with a fancy double riposte, changing the line of attack with the lightest pressure of his fingers. Richard St. Vier deflected the other's point, and brought his own clean past the boy's defenses.

The boy cried out at the light kiss of steel. But the swordsman did not stop the movements of the play. "It's a nick," he said. "Never mind the blood."

"Oh. But—"

"You wanted a lesson. Take it. All right, fine, you're scared now. You can't let it make a difference."

But it did make a difference. The boy's defense turned fierce, began to take on the air of desperate attack. Richard let it. They were fighting silently now, and really fighting, although the swordsman kept himself always from doing real damage. He began to play with the boy, leaving tiny openings just long enough to see if he would take advantage of them. The boy took about half—either his eye missed the others, or his body was too slow to act on them. Whatever he did, Richard parried his attacks, and kept him on the defensive.

"Now—" the swordsman said harshly— "Do you want to kill me, or just take me out?"

"I—don't know—"

"For death" — Richard's blade flew in — "straight to the heart. Always the heart."

The boy froze. His death was cold against his burning skin. Richard St. Vier dropped the point, raised it to resume the fight. The boy was sweating, panting, from fear as much as exertion. "A good touch—can be anywhere. As light as you like — or as deep."

The pug-nosed boy stood still. His nose was running. He still held his

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sword, while blood welled onto his skin and clothing from five different places.

"You're good," Richard St. Vier said, "but you can be better. Now get out of here."

"Richard, he's bleeding," Alec said quietly.

"I know he's bleeding. People do when they fight."

"It's night," Alec said, "in Riverside. People are out. You said you didn't want to kill him."

"Hand me that sheet." Sweat was cooling on Richard's body; he wrapped the linen around himself.

"There's brandy," Alec said. "I'll get it."

"I'm sorry I'm bleeding on your floor," the boy said. He wiped his nose with his sleeve. "I'm crying from shock, that's all. Not really crying."

He did not examine his own wounds. Alec did it for him, dabbing them with brandy. "You're remarkable," he told the boy. "I've been trying to get Richard to lose his temper forever." He handed the flask to St. Vier. "You can drink the rest."

Alec undid what the sword had left of the boy's jacket, and began pulling out the shirt. "It's a girl," he said abruptly, unsuspecting midwife to unnatural birth.

The girl said something rude. She'd stopped crying.

"So are you," Alec retorted. His hand darted into her breast pocket, pulled out the small book that had rested there, its soft leather cover warm and sweaty. He flipped it open, snapped it shut.

"Don't you know how to read?" the girl asked nastily.

"I don't read this kind of trash. *The Swordsman Whose Name Was Not Death.* My sister had it; they all do. It's about some Noble girl who comes home from a ball and finds a swordsman waiting in her room for her. He doesn't kill her; he fucks her instead. She loves it. The End."

"No—" she said, her face flushed — "You've got it wrong. You're stupid. You don't know anything about it."

"Hey," said Alec, "you're cute with your nose running, sweetheart —you know that?"

"You're stupid!" she said again fiercely. "*Stupid bastard.*" Harsh and precise, as though the words were new in her mouth. "What do you know about anything?"

"I know more than you think. I may not have your exceptional skill with

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steel, but I know about your other tricks. I know what works for you."

"Oh," she flared, "so it's come down to *that*." Furious, she was starting to cry again, against her will, furious about that, too. "The sword doesn't matter to you; the book doesn't matter — *that's* all you can understand. You don't know anything—anything at all!"

"Oh, don't I?" Alec breathed. His eyes were bright, a spot of color high on each cheek. "You think I don't know all about it? With my sister, it was horses—both real and imaginary." He mastered himself enough to assume his usual sneer, passionless and obnoxious. "Mares in the stable, golden stallions in the orchard. She told me their names. I used to eat the apples she picked for them, to make it seem more real. I know about it," he said bitterly. "My sister's magic horses were powerful; she rode them across sea and land; she loved them and gave them names. But in the end they failed her, didn't they? In the end they took her nowhere, brought her nothing at all."

Richard sat on the edge of the bed, brandy forgotten in his hand. Alec never spoke of his family. Richard didn't know he had a sister. He listened.

"My sister was married — to a man chosen for her, a man she didn't like, a man she was afraid of. Those goddamned horses waited for her in the orchard, waited all night for her to come to them. They would have borne her anywhere, for love of her — but she never came . . . and then it was her wedding day." Alec lifted the book high, slammed it against the far wall. "I know all about it."

The girl was looking at Alec, not at her broken book. "And where were you?" she said. "Where were you when this forced marriage took place—waiting in the orchard with them? Oh, I know, too — You took them and you escaped." Holding herself stiffly against her cuts, she bent over, picked up the book, smoothed it back into shape. "You don't know. You don't know at all. And you don't want to. Either of you."

"Alec," Richard said, "come to bed."

"Thank you for the lesson," she said to the swordsman. "I'll remember."

"It wouldn't have made a difference," he told her. "You'll have to find someone else. That's the way it is. Be careful, though."

"Thank you," she said again. "I will be careful, now that there's something to be careful for. You meant what you said, didn't you?"

"Yes," Richard said. "I don't usually get that angry. I meant it."

"Good." She turned in the doorway, asked in the same flat, cold tone, "What's your sister's name?"

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Alec was still where he'd been when he threw the book, standing stiff and pale. Richard knew that his reaction, when it hit, would be violent.

"I said, what's her name?"

Alec told her.

"Good. I'm going to find her. I'll give her this" — the book, now fingerprinted with dried blood — "and your love."

She stopped again, opened the book, and read: "'I was a girl until tonight. I am a woman now.' That's how it ends. But you never read it, so you'll never know what comes in between." She smiled a steel-biting smile. "I have, and I do. I'll be all right out there, won't I?"

"Come to bed, Alec," Richard said again; "you're shaking."

"Hey, pal, lighten up!"

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Joe L. Hensley makes his living as a lawyer and a writer of suspense novels. He publishes a few short stories every now and then. He returns to these pages with a beautiful and magical story about a topic usually shied away from: the death of a child.

Alvin's Witch

By Joe L. Hensley

ALVIN, FIVE YEARS old, and to be no older, lay quietly in his hospital bed, gazing upward at the rows of red, white, and blue bears that papered the walls of this room in the pediatric section. Outside his window he could hear, over the mid-morning clamor of the hospital, the calls of winter birds. Sometimes birds came and sat on his windowsill, and Alvin liked to imagine that they watched him and waited for him to come play their intricate flying games.

Today there was no intense pain, but instead the hated hotness. The tubes that sustained him gurgled softly as they dripped in drugs for the infections and the pain, plus glucose for food and drink. Alvin's breathing was labored, and the world smelled bad to him.

At the foot of the bed, there were small toys brought by kind nurses and attendants, mostly discards from their own children. Alvin had not

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played with the toys for a long while. He was waiting and willing to die, now wanting to play his final games only with death. He had hurt and fought and watched the doctors shake their heads and frown for a sufferingly long time. And he knew that his time drew near.

Massive secondary infections, disappearing white blood count, sarcomas, fever, falling blood pressure.

He lay, wishing that the witch would come. He hoped she was his friend, but he was unsure of it. Friends were seldom happenings. Mostly people tolerated him because they were sorry for him. He realized that was the way of life without it being a problem to him. One took what one could. His life had been hospitals and, before that, welfare homes.

Sometimes he thought all he saw in strange witch eyes was curiosity and pity, without caring. It was, he figured, enough.

Now and then a masked attendant came inside the room and ministered to him carefully, monitoring and charting blood pressure, breathing, and temperature. Alvin no longer could tolerate orally given drugs, and so medication and sustenance were delivered to him through the IVs. He watched the attendants and nurses do things, and when they said words to him, he tried to understand from his distant place. He smiled for the nurse when she asked him to do that. She patted him absently with a rubber-gloved hand and then left.

He was grateful for the pat. It was an act that acknowledged that he was there.

The "witch" was not really a witch at all, but was instead a mostly female, mostly pure-energy being from a distant galaxy who was stranded and had been stranded alone on Earth for a long time. She had her own reasons for living in and around the huge hospital. Inside, things could be found to sustain life while she waited. She had been on her way to "home," moving along light-years in milliseconds, when things had gone wrong, and the power to move in subspace had instantly vanished. Wounded, she had found Earth nearby. Now she waited. Sometime, late or soon, another of her kind would come within calling range of her constant signal, and she would be rescued. *Maybe, if whoever heard it bothered to stop.*

For fifty-plus Earth years, the witch had existed on Earth. In the hospital labs, she could find the basics she occasionally needed. She liked, now and then, to bathe in the rays of the X-ray machine, and she spent

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part days, when the sun was high and hot, contemplating that yellow ball from the hospital roof. It was a poor, small sun, but it was the only one she now had.

She had haunted the children's ward for all her stranded years, curious about the children, drawn to them. She had been on her way home to take part in the birth rituals and perhaps to play a role (if a contract could be made). The accident in the journey had left her here, and so the children seemed a partial substitute for what was lost and what might never now be found. She recognized that coldly.

Still, she enjoyed the children. When children grew older and became adults, they no longer interested her, but she liked the way the very young ones accepted her witch as a reality. She had now become a part of the life and death of the pediatric wing, seen only by the children. She had become, in appearance, a witch because of the pictures in the books she had read, and because witches were beings the children could easily accept. At one time she had toyed with the idea of being a dragon, but witches were easier to do and less taxing on scant remaining energy.

The witch left her invisible broom in a corner and came to Alvin's bed and perched on the end of it. She tried to dress as the witches in the children's books she'd read were pictured. She wore a black cape and a pointy hat and had a wen on her nose. She had sharp teeth and long nails. Her age was indeterminate.

"Did you count the bears?" the witch asked, nodding at the bright walls. "I told you that I wanted all of the bears counted, and that if you didn't do that, I would bake you into a birthday cake."

Alvin smiled as he had for the nurse, and put pain and heat away, hiding from them for a time, using the strength he had husbanded for her desired coming.

"I counted and counted," Alvin said. "And I waited for you. Thank you for coming to see me."

"How many bears?" the witch asked implacably. Sometimes her manner frightened children, but not Alvin. She could almost feel the heat that was already cooking him. And yet he remained polite.

"A hundred hundred," he said, not sure. Small numbers were understandable to Alvin at five. Large numbers were not.

The witch was satisfied. *Close enough.* She nodded. She read him and realized that he had tried hard to do the task assigned.

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"How do you feel today?"

"Fine, thank you, and there were pigeons outside the window earlier," Alvin said. He smiled up at her and said matter-of-factly, "I want to be like them. I want to fly over the trees and chimneys and church steeples."

"And eat bugs and be eaten by bigger birds."

"Yes," he said, unafraid.

"Yes. Maybe you would like that." The witch understood something of death, but could do little about it. She had studied the children for a long time, watched the doctors, seen and examined the medicines and machines, and tried a few times to intervene in the dying process, without success. She sensed that when the children died, something of them remained and went on to a place she could not see, but could perceive was there. Once, she had tried to capture what escaped at death, but it had moved past her. She believed that small essence, and the others, had moved on to a dark and lonely place. She knew that the boy Alvin would soon go there, and she did not like losing him.

He was alone. She was alone.

Alvin had no one. He had been born testing positive and had been abandoned early, found and raised by welfare, now cared for by the state. He had a disease passed on to him by his mother at birth, a fatal disease. The disease had appeared early, and there had never been time for true play, for knowing other children.

And yet she knew he was brave and intelligent and did not hate those around him. She also knew that when he thought of the vanished mother, he did not hate her, but only longed for her. *Love was not understandable.*

The witch thought that Alvin was remarkable. She came from a race that had conquered much, but never hate. Long life had made her race intolerant and suspicious of each other. They roamed the stars and came together cautiously only to create new life. Her race was not gregarious. Mostly, they despised each other and the thousand thousand other races they thought inferior.

"What would you like to do today?" she asked.

He smiled. "Hide-and-seek?" He loved the game.

"Then hide-and-seek it is. I will be 'it.'"

They played a game that they had played before. She hid behind the bears on the wall, and his mind sought her, his small, quick one reaching out and seeking her. Today his movements were slow and careful, and he

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could not hide, but only seek.

Soon now. Soon now.

HUGE HOSPITALS run full-time, but the nights were quietest and best. At night the hordes of day workers motored home, and the sounds and smells of the day became muted.

The witch again visited the doctors' library off the medical records room. She read fretfully, absorbing books and medical journal articles in gulps, culling out the unneeded. Downstairs, in Emergency, they brought in the injured from a two-car wreck and worked over them frantically, losing two, saving three. In Intensive Care an old man's heart stopped and refused to start again. A young woman fought against the multicancers that had taken over her body, and finally lost. *Routine.*

Now and then the library door opened, and a sleepy doctor entered, seeking light and truth. When that happened the witch made herself completely invisible and waited. At times in the past, to confuse and impress, she had quixotically made the pages move as some doctor or nurse watched, but today she was without mischief, not wanting to create any disturbance. Besides, she rather admired and liked the doctors. They knew so little, but they tried so hard.

The disease of the boy was called AIDS, and she read once more what there was in the literature. Not much. Virus-caused. Incurable so far. Late or soon Alvin would die. The process was long-running, but most of Alvin's sands had already fallen.

The boy wanted to die. The thing to do was to allow it to happen.

And yet . . . .

The thought of his dying filled her with disquietude. She remembered dimly the dusty halls of her own past. She could control her own life and probably her own death. Barring a catastrophic accident, she would live for millions of years. Someday she would be found and be a part of her odd, untreasured society again. And she would resume her dull tour of the galaxies. Alone.

She tried to recall the childhood of her own life, but it was vague and almost forgotten. *There had once been a caring someone, but what had it meant?*

When the sun rose, she went to the roof. The sun above was a wan yellow sun, but it comforted her even on the cold days.

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"Hello, small sun," she said.

She watched the pigeons cluster on a church roof. They cooed and pecked at each other. The birds were like the humans of this small planet. They lived for flocking around each other, fighting some, hating some, loving some.

A sharp-eyed hawk watched the pigeons from on high, seeking food. The pigeons sensed the hawk and fled, flying low.

The boy could tell there was more activity around him on this morning. The lab lady who tested his blood pressure and took his temperature fluttered about the room. Doctors came and did their own examinations. Nurses and attendants patted pillows and touched him and then went to remove their rubber gloves. He knew that what he had was an unclean disease and that they feared it. He smiled up at them and tried to hold his eyes open so that he could see.

The witch came finally and sat on the end of his bed. She looked warm and well from the sun. Once, when his bed had been rolled near the window, he had seen her sitting on the hospital roof, and he knew of her affair with the sun.

"Hi, witch," he murmured. "You have been sitting in the sun again. Was it warm today?"

The nurse asked, "What was that, Alvin?"

Alvin ignored the nurse and watched the witch. The nurse straightened pillows. *The boy was delirious.*

Together, with interruptions by various hospital players, the threesome waited for Alvin to die.

Light became dark, and Alvin smiled up at the witch once more, comforted that she was there. He fell into a sleep that was like a coma. The strong drugs dulled the pain.

She examined him. He had never asked for a favor. He had accepted her as a playmate, as a witch, and maybe something more.

Outside, the birds came to the window just at dark. The witch watched them. The birds had small brains. Once, for a time, she had controlled one as it swooped and soared, and it had meant nothing to her.

A doctor visited and directed that a respirator be used. Another doctor argued with him.

No respirator came.

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The witch thought on a new thing. It was revolutionary and against all her racial instincts. She could exit life along with the boy. She could take what came at the end of energy life and see if she could fashion something new for both of them afterward. She knew if she exited, that her signal would stop, and no one of her race would ever come for her.

She watched from the end of the bed, knowing that her being found by others of her race was not truly a wanted answer.

Fifty years on this small planet and under its weak sun had forged her more than the millennia.

The boy awoke one more time. He awoke to pain and hotness, and he was lonely. But he saw the witch through dim eyes and found a last smile. As he died, he no longer knew her. The witch was only a watcher.

"Mother," he called softly. "Mother."

Outside, when it was spring, a brace of pigeons sat on a windowsill of the hospital. Inside the room a six-year-old girl lay in traction. She had broken her left femur as she played. Soon she would be in a body cast and be allowed to go home. She would see her friends again, fight with her brother, and cavort in the warmth of the spring. *Walking, running.*

She watched the birds at the window and exclaimed delightedly about them to her mother.

"They're so friendly," she said. "They watch me from the window."

The birds looked inside the room for a long time and then flew over the steeples and the trees to the spring's high river. They searched for food, found it, and then flew again. Trees were in warm, full bud, and the world was going into its green phase. The two birds rested with other pigeons atop a church, cooing gregariously.

And Alvin thought to his companion, "I hoped it would be this way."

The witch fluttered her strong wings companionably. Sometimes she thought on what had been lost and found, and she was content with both.

Next year would be early enough to explore the chance of a new, firmer existence, new bodies, perhaps fraternal twins with birth-damaged brains. She would find them. She had looked inside babies before and found nothing there. A whole world of births to explore. *Somewhere . . . .*

Then life and love and death, or whatever she could manage.

But this year was a time for birds.

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Nicholas A. DiChario has sold short fiction to Universe 2 *and* Starshore. *He lives and writes in New York state. "The Power of Love" is not about childhood. Instead, it's about one of childhood's major issues: Power. Melissa and Bony are in early adolescence, on the brink of accepting their personal power as adults, when they encounter something strange in the trees. Something that will change their relationships — and their understanding of life — forever.*

The Power of Love

By Nicholas A. DiChario

MELISSA WOULD FOLLOW wherever Bony went. At least that's the way it had always been. So what if Melissa disliked herself for it. So what if she was born on the same day as Bony, just one minute later, in the same hospital. So what if her pa's apple orchard ran back-to-back with Bony's pa's chicken farm. Were those good enough reasons to treat them like married folk at the age of twelve, for God's sake, like she didn't have no say in the matter at all?

"C'mon, Missy, this can't wait." Bony biked a wide circle around Melissa, slamming on his brakes to lay down a patch on her pa's rutted dirt-and-gravel driveway.

"Can't," she said, fanning the dust from her face. "Got to watch Jason."

At the mention of his name, Jason looked up from the slug he'd been slicing with his thumbnail. "You can't leave me alone."

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"Bring 'm, Mis," Bony said, "if you got to."

Melissa figured Bony must be desperate to let Jason tag along on an exploration.

"How old are you, Jason?" Bony said.

"Six."

"Perfect. Got to be at least six to see this, or your head will blow up."

Jason perked up at that. "I'm six, ain't I, Mis?"

"Doesn't matter. Nothing's going to blow up your head."

"Missy," Bony said. "We don't get down to the river now, they'll be gone."

"They who?"

"The aliens. Found them this morning."

"You went exploring without me?" She shot Bony a tight-lipped scowl. They had made a pact. She thought for a moment about how to handle this. "You apologize right now. Off your bike. On one knee."

"I can't always go riding around with a girl. We got no pact for that." Bony had used this argument before.

"You're lying anyway," she said. "You didn't find no aliens."

"Did—and I don't care if you stay home, 'cause then all pacts are off. Off for good."

Melissa frowned. She never wanted to make no pacts with Bony anyway. He always made up new rules. Besides, she didn't want Jason underfoot any more than you'd want a stranger's dog to lick your face. It was just plain bad luck. Last month, LuAnne Gibney took her little brother on a date with Peter Stodenheimer to the county fair, and that boy never did call her back. (Although LuAnne Gibney was a zit face.)

"I'm going," said Bony.

Melissa peered back at the house. If Mom were home, she'd have a fit, but she was out delivering fliers in Lewisport for the K mart grand opening.

Grandma was inside baby-sitting, writing another one of her stories for *Lurid Confessions* magazine, under the name of Len Strong. This was a family secret. "Amuse your brother so 's I can write," she'd told Melissa. Never said anything about not exploring. Besides, if there really were aliens down by the river, Grandma would be more disappointed than anybody if Melissa didn't go see them for herself.

Melissa grabbed Jason by the wrist. "Wait up, Bony; we're on foot."

"I'll ride slow," he said, then took off full speed.

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When they got to the railroad tracks, Bony ditched his bike. You couldn't do any real exploring past the tracks except on foot. The railroad tracks ran the length of the Red Pine River for miles before they came to a dead stop at Turning Point Park, where someone had built a fancy restaurant for the city folk. That was way up the other end of the river, though. Down here, there were only small apple orchards like her pa's, and some cow pastures and cornfields and vineyards — and power. The Puttneyville Gas & Electric power plant sat on the bank of the river, and then, directly across from it on the opposite side of the Red Pine River, was the Grove County nuclear power plant.

"Do we have to cross the tracks?" asked Melissa. She had turned her ankle on a loose tie last week and thought for sure she'd busted it.

"Whataya, scared?" Bony hopped across the tracks. "Aliens ain't got all day."

"I don't believe you one bit about those aliens anyway," she said.

"Yeah," Jason agreed, but Missy could tell he wasn't convinced.

Bony didn't answer. He'd already disappeared into the woods.

"I got a sliver, Mis," Jason said, wiping the snot from the end of his nose with the ball of his fist.

"We'll get it later." They tiptoed across the tracks.

Why did Bony always have to do stuff like this anyway? Any second now he'd pop out from behind a tree and scare her half to death and laugh like an idiot. "Gotcha! Gotcha!" he'd say. "Never was no aliens!" And he'd think that was the most hysterical prank on God's earth. It was one thing to be different, like when he would eat ice cream off the gravel, or go hunting frogs with his Louisville Slugger because he loved the squish-knock sound of a solid hit. A girl could live with that. But he did crazy stuff she hated, like walking the fence around that big old PG&E generator, right over the top of the DANGER sign. Why, Bony could get himself fried and killed in a second, and Melissa would be stuck to drag him home like a big old bag of charcoal.

She had asked her grandma once why there were wild boys like Bony to drive girls crazy. Her grandma, a tall, straight twig of a woman, had a way of saying stuff so that you'd remember it forever and a day. "There ain't no real logic in the world," she told Melissa. "Only power. That's why things happen the way they happen. One kind of power is always running into another kind of power. Something's got to give." That was just as good as

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any Sunday school explanation for the way the world worked, as far as Melissa could tell. Bony had the power of recklessness in him. And what did Melissa have? Best power in the world, according to her grandma. The power of love.

But marriage? Marriage to somebody who got stupid if he stood still too long? Not likely. Yet even her grandma, who had a reputation for picking the winners at the racetrack as if she were charmed, had said marriage was entirely possible.

She braced herself for Bony's attack as she passed the first row of trees leading down to the river trail, but Bony didn't jump out at her. It occurred to Melissa that if this was a prank, Bony was playing it awful cool.

"This way," he shouted.

"Wait up!"

They followed Bony through the tall grass and chickweed and horsetail. Melissa was clumsy in the woods. Thistles always seemed to jump out and nip her. The stink of skunk cabbage put a permanent wrinkle in her nose, the burdock made her sneeze, and the bulrushes made her nervous because they were taller than she was.

Jason whined about the sliver in his finger until Missy finally stopped to yank it out. Still, Bony didn't ditch them, even when they crept extra slow over the gully bridge. The bridge was hardly ever used; most people never came so far downriver. There were loose, raw planks to heed, whittled and weather-beaten by time and the harsh hand of Mother Nature. There were a couple of treacherous empty stretches where you could see straight through to a sheer rock face and a trickling steam a hundred feet below. The iron frame seemed shaky at best. Melissa was terrified. If this turned out to be one of Bony's pranks, she'd stake his skinny arms and legs to an anthill till he begged forgiveness, and then she'd have a thing or two to say about pacts and marriage.

The air grew cooler as they neared the roiling waters. Melissa could almost reach out and touch the sound of the water gulping up against the docks, or the smell of fish and algae curling around her like a living thing. The dewy river air felt like a second skin to her. Sometimes she could hear voices on a boat miles off, or the sound of kids horseplaying on a raft in the sandbar across the river, like they were right up next to her, whispering in her ear. It made her feel special.

Bony couldn't look long and hard down the river and see its magic. The

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Red Pine region was his own personal playground, nothing more. That was O.K. with Melissa. If Bony wanted to see only what was in front of his eyes, he was perfectly free to do so. But her grandma sure wouldn't have approved.

Finally they reached the open field behind the PG&E.

"We're almost there. Just over the ridge, down by the waterfront. You can see their ship from that bunch of trees." Bony pointed to the crest of a rise over the river's edge and took off for it at a dead run.

"Wait up!" Melissa said, forgetting about her brother.

"Hey, you can't leave me alone!" Jason said.

"C'mon—"

Melissa knew the hill well. She'd been up there with Bony before. It was the only spot on the riverbank where you could see both power plants and the full stretch of the Red Pine before the thin line of green-brown water hit the bend at Turning Point Park, and an endless crown of trees sucked it up and spat it out again somewhere miles off.

When she reached the peak of the hill, she had to squat down to catch her breath. Jason wheezed like a punctured inner tube.

"C'mere!" Bony yanked Melissa to the ledge and pointed down the slope. "There," he said, "just above shoreline. See it?"

Sure enough, there it was. A blue globe about twice as big around as her Aunt Virginia's swimming pool, half-buried in the rock face, shimmering like one of Grandma's cut-glass bowls under a beaming ray of sunlight. No prank. No siree. The thing hummed like one of those huge fenced-in generators, and the earth under her feet trembled. It stole Melissa's breath.

"How do you know there's aliens inside?" she said.

"Caught sight of 'm earlier this morning. They're red, bright red with slick skin, like your pa's apples."

Melissa couldn't take her eyes off the blue globe.

"Let's go," Bony said with the same rise in his voice that always bespoke his acts of stupidity.

"Wait. You can't just go running off down there."

"Why not?"

Melissa didn't know how to answer that. There was something not right about that blue globe. She could feel it. Intuition, her grandma would call it. That thing down there, whatever it was, didn't belong on the river. but how could she explain that to Bony?

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"You don't know where they came from or what they want," she said.

"Who cares? I'll talk to them — make them tell me — just watch."

"You know you're not supposed to talk to strangers."

That was all Bony needed to hear. "I'm going down. If you don't want to come, all pacts are off."

"Fine! That's just fine with me. You never listen anyway — Never!"

Bony got suspiciously deaf whenever Melissa raised her voice. He lowered himself over the ridge. There was a dirt path that wound its way down to the shoreline through a dense wall of pines. He started down the path. Jason started after him, but Melissa grabbed hold of his shoulders.

"Ain't we gonna follow Bony?" he said.

"No."

She looked down at the globe. Its color was wavering now between a dim flat blue and an icy white, as if the ship were breathing. Breathing or not, the darn thing smelled dead — worse than the stink when they had dredged the peat bog out back of Widow Sutter's granary.

Power . . . .

The thought came to her all of a sudden. The PG&E, the Grove County nuclear power plant, the river itself — all this power in one place. That's what had brought those aliens. Who knew how many other places they'd landed? Maybe it was a full-blown invasion.

"Jason, listen to me real careful. You've got to get back to the house and tell Grandma we're in a peck of trouble down by the river. Tell her to send the army or the navy or the coast guard or — no, never mind all that —just tell her we found us some aliens; she'll know what to do."

"I can't go alone."

"You can do it." She pointed to the sky. "Just follow the power lines till you get back to the railroad tracks. You know the way from there." She knelt down and kissed Jason on the cheek. "For me and Bony. We're counting on you."

Melissa looked down over the ridge. She could see Bony's outline against the blue-white glimmer of the alien ship. There was a nasty chill in the air. The cold, it seemed, was getting colder. The smell was getting smellier.

Then she saw the aliens, pudgy fellas, like Joshua trees with bright red clusters and thick roan trunks.

"Mis, I'm scared," Jason said.

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"Me, too. But somebody's got to look after that reckless boy if we're ever going to get married."

Jason turned tail and scampered awkwardly down the hill. Melissa watched him until he disappeared into the woods, then she crawled over the ridge and hurried down the slope.

The stink was so god-awful, her eyes began to water.

Bony was standing right up close to the alien ship, scared stiff. She sidled up next to him.

The aliens were faceless. On the end of each red cluster was an eye (as far as she could tell), and down low on the trunk, what could have passed for a mouth. Grazers, Melissa thought with some relief. That shiny red skin Bony had spotted from up on the ridge was gooey up close, like some kind of rusty mucus-taffy.

The aliens watched her and Bony with all their eyes. The Red Pine River had gone dead calm, and the wind hadn't bothered to rustle the trees for quite some time. There wasn't the stir of an animal or the buzz of an insect anywhere to be heard. Seemed like everything had had the good sense to run off except for her and Bony.

That was when Melissa looked into those alien eyes — all at once. Not ordinary eyes, she was certain — more like hands. She could feel them probing inside her, digging around like busy little garden tools. She felt them stealing something from her, although she couldn't say exactly what it was.

She finally found the strength to nudge Bony. "Bony," she whispered. She could see him shivering. Missy felt she had to do something — protect him — somehow. But what could she do? *Step in front of the boy,* she told herself. *Take me! not Bony.* That's what it was all about, wasn't it? — pacts and marriage and self-sacrifice and commitment. Being grown-up. But suddenly . . . oh so suddenly . . . that impulse to save Bony's hide had deserted her. Melissa felt empty, like she'd run out of emotional gas.

She stood there. Did nothing.

Before she could make a move, the aliens backed away, shuffled into their ship and disappeared. Blinked out like a blue light bulb — *pop!* — as if they had never been there. Her moment of action, Missy knew, had come and gone.

But that woebegone expression on Bony's face, that would never disappear.

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Melissa tried to talk Bony back up the slope, but he wouldn't budge. She had to hike back to town herself and get the ambulance squad to come rescue him. Jason got lost in the woods, but the police found him before sundown. Grandma was never allowed to baby-sit again. Some folks believed Melissa about the aliens; some didn't. Bony wasn't saying anything. It was the talk of the town for a spell. Apparently it was not an invasion; no other sightings had been reported for that day.

IT TURNED into a torturously long summer's vacation for Missy. Bony refused to acknowledge her existence. Summer faded into fall. When school started, Bony refused to ride the bus with the other kids. His pa drove him to school every day in the family Jeep Cherokee, and picked him up afterward. Peter Stodenheimer asked Missy to the Halloween party — Gutless Stodenheimer who had never called back LuAnne Gibney — but he was cute. Missy accepted, hoping to light a fire under Bony, but she managed only to push him farther away. Melissa discovered she no longer had the wherewithal to pursue the boy.

Eventually the *FOR SALE* sign went up on Bony's pa's chicken farm, and without so much as a peep, his family moved up North.

For a while after Bony was gone, Melissa would journey up the ridge every weekend to where she could see the full stretch of the Red Pine River, to where she and Bony had first spotted the aliens. She would always go alone. She'd stare down the slope for hours. When she married Peter Stodenheimer, she cut back some, and by the time she gave birth to her fourth child, she made the pilgrimage only once a year, on the anniversary of that dreadful day.

Melissa heard rumors about Bony from time to time. He worked for the government for a while as a cook, or a gravedigger at Arlington Cemetery, or a data something-or-other specialist. He never returned to the Red Pine region.

Nobody ever asked Melissa what she was looking for up on the crest of that ridge every year. Most people didn't care — and those who did, didn't want to know.

It was no big secret as far as Melissa was concerned. She was looking for what those aliens had swiped from her way back when. Not the boy with whom she had once hoped to share a lifetime (she could admit this now even though she'd spent the better part of her adolescence denying it).

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Not her childhood innocence. Certainly not those damn aliens.

Melissa was looking for power.

Whether the aliens had actually stolen it from her with those eyes that were like hands, or whether, through some inadequacy of her own, she had given it away didn't matter much. It was gone.

Bony had lost the power to face his fears. Melissa had lost the best power in the world, according to her grandma. The power of love.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

LIKE ALL literate kids, I read the tale of Aladdin and his Lamp when I was quite young, and like every kid who did so, I wanted that lamp. I had visions of finding an old lamp in a garbage can (though I had no idea of what such a lamp was supposed to look like), and rubbing it, and promptly encountering an eager genie who would want to fulfill my every wish.

The only catch was that I didn't know what to wish for. Aladdin had wished for a castle, and dancing girls, and slaves carrying trays of gems, and a feast on golden dishes. I had a feeling, however, that if I showed up with any of these things — especially dancing girls — in the noble borough of Brooklyn, it would cause comment.

So my nine-year-old self decided that the best thing would be to ask for money. Gold coins would be the most thrilling, but, on the whole, I thought I would be better off with American bills. Once I had those, I would at once turn them over to my father. (It never occurred to me that I might keep the money for myself.)

How much money? To my young imagination, a thousand dollars was virtually infinite, so I thought of how pleasant it would be to have a thick sheaf of ones, fives, tens and twenties, and hand them to my father and say, "Here's a thousand dollars, Pappa."

But then I had a follow-up vision. My father would turn white, his eyes would grow large and round, and, refusing to touch the bills, he would thunder, "Where did you get that money, Isaac?"

It would be no use explaining. He would be convinced that I had somehow learned how to rob a bank at the age of nine, and he would have called the police and turned me in. That's how Talmudic patriarchs managed things.

After all, Abraham had been told

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by God to drag off his son to the wilderness and sacrifice him, and Abraham promptly set out to obey. And his son, who was saved at the last minute, was also named Isaac.

I felt I couldn't take the chance, and I stopped looking for Aladdin's lamp in the garbage cans I passed.

But then I became an adult and, little by little, accumulated Aladdin's lamp, or at least the nearest thing to Aladdin's lamp that can exist in reality. It's called "money."

I sit about these days trying to plan my estate so that when I pass on to that great word-processor in the sky, the government, in collecting its share, will leave a few pennies for my wife and children. It's a very difficult problem.

My dear wife, Janet, who loves me more than she loves herself for some reason no one can possibly define, watched me suffer and said recently, "Why do you worry about survivors? Why don't you spend some of your money on yourself? You have food, shelter, clothing, a nice apartment, work-material — but surely there is some useless luxury you want, some decadent possession, some silly thing. Whatever it is, you can afford it, so why not go for it?"

"Hey," I said, "what an exciting idea." And, after sixty years, I returned to the task of figuring out what I wanted the genie to do for me. And after a lot of pondering, I came up with the same old answer.

"Janet," I said, "the trouble is that there's nothing I want."

"You're hopeless," she said — a conclusion she comes to anyway, two or three times a week.

The world in general, however, does want something. If possible, it wants it for nothing, to have it showered on it by a genie.

All through history there has been an impatience with the bonds of natural law and a feeling one ought to seek for help outside those bonds, to fairy godmothers, to angels, to gods and demons.

Millions of people in America today pray earnestly and periodically, in the hope that as a result of their ardent pleas, God will set aside the laws of nature for their convenience.

If, however, we confine ourselves to observing nature, then we come to the opposite conclusion. Far from getting something for nothing, we are getting nothing for something. Everything that lives eventually dies. Many things, including corpses, rot with time. Motions slow and eventually stop, whether it is the motion of a living thing or of an inanimate object.

It was observations such as these that made the early philosophers (and their successors right down to

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the 1600's) feel that Earth was a place of corruption and decay, of continuous disintegration. It was amazing that it had not yet entirely decayed, but European philosophers, at least, expected that the day of judgement would not be long delayed, and universal decay might herald that day.

The heavenly bodies, however, clearly did not change or decay but kept rolling about the sky forever. Their fires did not go out as Earthly fires did. Their motion did not slow up. It seemed clear to Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) that the Earth and the heavens were made up of fundamentally different materials and followed altogether different laws of nature.

It was not till the 1600's that scientists were able to show that the same laws of nature governed the Earth and all the other objects of the Universe. It was not till then that they could show that objects of Earth, in some ways, did not change or decay. There were aspects of matter that were as eternal and changeless on Earth as they appeared to be in the sky.

(In the 1800's, to be sure, scientists found that everything did indeed decay and disintegrate, not only on Earth but in every part of the Universe. This decay, however, was after a fashion that was much more subtle than that which had been worked out by the ancients.)

Let's start with billiard balls. Billiards had been played, I am sure, long before the laws of motion were worked out by Isaac Newton (1642-1727) in 1687. Billiards is played today, and with enormous expertise, by people who know nothing about the laws of motion as formal statements. However, they know how billiard balls move, what happens when they hit each other or the rim of the billiard table.

When a billiard ball hits the rim of the table, it rebounds, moving in another direction (depending on its angle of impact) with the same speed it had at the start. (Actually, some speed is lost because there is friction between the rolling ball, the table's surface, and the table's rim, but that loss is very small and we can ignore it.) Similarly, if two billiard balls, moving at equal speeds, strike each other head-on in mid-table, they rebound and move away from each other at the same speed with which they had moved toward each other.

It would seem from considerations like this that, if we ignore friction, velocity is not lost in the course of the movements of billiard balls. We might say the velocity is conserved — except that it isn't. The only reason it seems to exist in the conditions I have been discuss-

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ing is that all the billiard balls are of equal mass.

Suppose, though, that we imagine two billiard balls, one of which is somewhat more massive than the other, speeding toward each other at equal speeds. Both rebound, but the lighter one rebounds faster than the more massive one, and if the speeds of rebound are totaled, they turn out to be not quite the same as the total speeds of impact. Speed has not been conserved.

The English mathematician John Wallis (1616-1703) pointed out in 1668 that the true measure of motion was not speed alone, or, more accurately, "velocity" (v), but was mass multiplied by velocity (mv). This product he called movement or, in Latin, "momentum."

It turned out, on measurement, that momentum is conserved. No matter how billiard balls (or anything else) strike and rebound, the amounts of momentum after the rebounding is exactly the same as before (once again, ignoring friction).

It's not as simple as it sounds, however. Billiard balls are just about perfectly elastic and lose nothing in the act of impact and rebound. Imagine, though, you have two billiard balls racing toward each other and, at the moment of impact, they turn into clay. Now you have a totally inelastic impact. The clay deforms and sticks together and neither billiard ball rebounds. Indeed, they remain stuck together and entirely motionless. Both balls had momentum as they sped toward each other, and now that they are motionless, the momentum is gone. Since momentum ought to be conserved, what happened to it?

Velocity is a "vector quantity." That means, it has direction as well as speed. In fact, "speed" is merely the rate of movement in any direction. As soon as we specify a direction as well, it becomes "velocity."

Since momentum is mass times velocity, momentum is also a vector quantity, and direction of movement must be taken into account. It is customary, therefore, to measure momentum in a particular direction as a positive quantity (+mv) and momentum in the opposite direction as a negative quantity (-mv).

If two objects of equal mass, moving at equal speed, meet each other head-on, and suffer an inelastic collision which leaves them stuck together and motionless, we have demonstrated that +mv added to -mv equals zero, and momentum is indeed conserved.

If one object moves a little faster than the other before impact, then the two stick together and move in the direction of the faster motion

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with just enough speed to conserve total momentum. If the two objects are partly elastic and rebound, but with less speed than before the impact, the total momentum is still unchanged.

If two objects collide at an angle, they rebound at an angle, but if the momentum of each object, before and after collision, is measured with methods called "vector analysis" so that each object has its motion converted into a positive and negative component, we find that momentum is conserved.

In fact, imagine an object sitting quietly and at rest, with a momentum of zero. Suddenly, it explodes and its fragments fly in all directions. Each fragment has a momentum that is not zero, but if all the momenta are added vectorially, it turns out that the total remains zero.

It is not the momentum of each component of a system that is conserved, but the total momentum of the entire system.

When we consider the conservation of any property, we must be careful to consider a "closed system"; one where some of that property does not leak in from outside or leak out to the outside, either.

If we imagine billiard balls moving about on an infinite surface, impacting and rebounding, then that surface is a closed system, always ignoring the imperfections of friction.

A billiard table is, however, a small object with a rim. Imagine a billiard ball striking the rim of a table head-on and rebounding in its tracks, moving away along the same line and at the same speed with which it impacted. In this case, +mv has become -mv, and it would seem that momentum has not been conserved.

Not so, for the billiard table is itself part of the system, and when the billiard ball strikes the rim and rebounds, the table also rebounds in the opposite direction. Moreover, the billiard table is attached (by frictional forces, if by nothing else) to the Earth, so it is the entire planet that rebounds.

Since the Earth has a mass something like a thousand trillion trillion times that of a billiard ball, the planet recoils at a velocity only a thousandth of a trillionth of a trillionth that of the billiard ball — a velocity entirely immeasureable, but it's there. This is something people don't think of ordinarily. You don't think that the Earth is responding to the motion of billiard balls.

Probably the first thought that occurs to anyone who does hear of this for the first time (it certainly occurred to me) is that if enough

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billiard balls are bounced in the same direction, then eventually Earth's motion through space will be measureably affected.

The billiard ball strikes the edge of the table and rebounds. After it rebounds, it is stopped by your hand, let us say. That alters its momentum at once, and the momentum of the Earth is also altered. A billiard ball can undergo all kinds of motions and impacts and rebounds, with the Earth following faithfully, but eventually, the billiard ball, which was originally stationary, is stationary again and has regained its initial momentum of zero, and so does the Earth.

This also applies to the motion of cannonballs, the explosion of nuclear bombs, the falling of avalanches, the coming and going of ice-caps and so on. The momentum of the Earth as a whole is not, and cannot in the long run, be changed by alterations of any kind within the Earth — so its motion moves on with majestic constancy, barring always impacts and influences from outside the planet.

Wallis's law of conservation of momentum was the first of the great conservation laws to be established, and, after almost three and a half centuries of intense study, no exception to it has ever been clearly noted.

These conservation laws are, of course, merely generalizations that have been observed to exist. There is always the possibility that under certain unexpected circumstances they may be broken. Such circumstances have never been observed for the law of conservation of momentum, however, and you are not going to find any scientist who will risk any money on the possibility that the law of conservation of momentum will ever be broken.

There is a similar conservation law for objects that are turning rather than moving in a straight line. Turning objects demonstrate "the law of conservation of angular momentum."

Angular momentum is also a vector quantity and can exist in two opposite directions, clockwise and counterclockwise. Two objects, turning in opposite directions, might mesh and the turning will then stop altogether. Again, an object with zero angular momentum, if exploded, may produce fragments each of which is turning, but all the angular moments, if added together, will then come to zero.

Ordinary momentum and angular momentum are so similar in some ways that it is natural to wonder if it is possible to turn one into the other. Not really. They are two independent phenomena and exist separately.

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It may seem to you that that's not so. After all, if a horse pulls a wagon and gives it momentum, the wheels begin to turn so that the pull also creates angular momentum. Again, the rapid turning of the engine in an automobile produces the turning of wheels which, in turn, causes the car to move in a straight line at a great speed.

This, however, is entirely the result of frictional forces. The horse, in pulling the wagon, pushes against the Earth, which develops an equal momentum in the direction opposite to the one the horse creates. And when the wheels turn, it means that the Earth's angular momentum is equivalently changed in the opposite direction.

Things would be entirely different if friction were not involved. Imagine a car resting on a surface of perfectly smooth ice. You can start the engine and the wheels can be made to whirl, but the car won't budge from its place — not without friction. Nor can the horse make the wheels of the wagon turn as his hooves scrape uselessly against the ice.

Is it possible, then, to initiate motion in the absence of all friction?

Of course it is. An object hanging in outer space, if it explodes, will have portions of itself moving in all directions, and turning in all directions, too. The total momentum after explosion, however, is the same as it was before the explosion; and that is independently true of angular momentum as well.

But suppose you don't want to fly in all directions. Suppose you have a vehicle which you want to move in some specific direction through space, and you want to do it from a standing start. In that case, Newton pointed out that the only way of doing that was to arrange to make a portion of the vehicle move in one direction, so that the remainder of the vehicle would move in the opposite (desired) direction. Only so could the vehicle conserve momentum.

Imagine that you are on a large sled, resting on a sheet of frictionless ice and that with you in the sled is a pile of bricks. If you throw a brick in the direction opposite to that in which you want to go, the sled will at once move in the direction you do want to go. In the absence of friction, it will maintain that speed undiminished. If you throw additional bricks after the first in the same direction, the sled will pick up speed with each brick, and will finally be barrelling along.

The same thing works in space. Fuels are burned within the ship to create hot gases, which, under their own pressure, jet out in one direction so that the space ship is forced to move in the other.

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When the American physicist Robert Hutchings Goddard (1882-1945) was trying to send small liquid-fueled rockets high into the atmosphere, with the ultimate intention of working out a way to reach the Moon, he was roundly denounced in an editorial in *The New York Times*. This editorial, which became famous, informed Goddard how foolish he was not to know what every high-school boy knows, that you can't have motion unless you have something to push against.

The *Times* editorialist understood the importance of frictional forces, but, alas, he obviously knew nothing about the law of conservation of momentum or (its equivalent), Newton's third law of motion.

The rocket principle—this business of sending part of a system in one direction so that the rest may go in the other—seems extraordinarily wasteful. A spaceship must carry vast amounts of fuel to make progress, and it is only natural to look for some other way of doing it.

What if you could somehow turn angular momentum into ordinary momentum? What if you could make a wheel turn on board a spaceship and change that turning motion into the ship's straight motion. It might be much more efficient to keep the wheel turning and the ship moving, than to expend tons of fuel jetting out of the ship.

In the 1960's, a gentleman named Dean (I don't know his full name) claimed to have invented a device in which angular momentum was converted, at least in part, to ordinary momentum. If he set his wheeled device to turning, it would exert an upward momentum if properly oriented. He could prove this by placing it on a scale. The weight of the device would decrease when the wheel turned because it had a tendency to lift upward. In a sense, this would have the effect of anti-gravity, and it might lift spaceships up and into outer space more efficiently than the rocket principle would.

The interesting part of this to science fiction people is that John W. Campbell, Jr., the great editor of *Analog*, was a sucker for all kinds of fringe aspects of science, and he fell for this "Dean Drive" all the way. He was sure it worked and pushed it in the magazine all he could.

In scientific matters, I am a hard-line conservative, and to me the possibility of converting angular momentum into ordinary momentum is exactly as large as the possibility of finding Aladdin's lamp in a garbage can. I refused to believe that the Dean Drive had any value whatever, and in this I was joined

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by a number of other science fiction writers who had had scientific training.

None of this stopped Campbell, who was sure that scientists tended to get hardening of the intellectual arteries, so that they were forced to turn blindly away from anything that offended their ingrained prejudices.

Of course, John wasn't entirely wrong there. Scientists have been known, on occasion, to refuse to accept something worthwhile, despite all the evidence, simply because it didn't fit in with their beliefs.

However, beware fallacies. Just because scientists are sometimes blinded by prejudice to the new and useful, does not mean that any fringe belief must be true simply because scientists deny that it is. In almost all cases, when reputable scientists dismiss something as a violation of the laws of nature, it is indeed a violation and will not endure.

And the fact is that absolutely nothing has come of the Dean Drive.

Now we come to the problem of friction and momentum. Imagine a billiard ball on a table surface that is hit with a cue so very, very gently, that it hardly moves. Nevertheless, you have imparted a tiny momentum to it. The billiard ball may then move only a few inches, slowing and stopping because of frictional forces. What has happened to its momentum?

A proper answer to that question only came after the nature of heat was understood. Through the 1700's, heat was thought of as a subtle fluid (rather as we now think of the electric current). Different objects contained different quantities of the fluid, and it could travel from here to here just as any other fluid would.

In 1798, however, Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford (1753-1814), a Tory exile from the United States, was boring cannon in the service of the Elector of Bavaria. He noted that great quantities of heat were formed in the process. Neither the cannon being bored nor the boring instrument used was at more than room temperature to begin with, and yet the heat developed by the act of boring was sufficient to bring water to a boil after a time, and the longer the boring continued, the more water was boiled.

It was clear to Rumford that the act of boring created heat, and he suggested that the friction of the borer against the metal of the cannon put tiny parts of both into rapid motion, and that heat was an expression of this motion.

At the time, Rumford's point

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was ignored, but the passing of a few years made a change. Within a decade of Rumford's observation, the British chemist John Dalton (1766-1844) had brought out a convincing atomic theory, and chemists quickly began to think of matter as composed of tiny atoms.

It was these atoms, then, that were set into motion by friction, and it was that atomic motion that could be interpreted as heat.

In the 1840s, an English scientist, James Prescott Joule (1818-1889), studied heat carefully (something I will take up next month), and Rumford's suggestion began to appear to make more and more sense.

In the 1860's, A British physicist, James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879), and an Austrian physicist, Ludwig Boltzmann (1844-1906), independently worked out the mathematics of atomic motion within matter, showing that the notion of random motion of the atoms as an expression of heat (the "kinetic theory") was entirely justifiable.

This makes the frictional effect on momentum clear. When an object moves along a surface, there is never zero friction. There are always little unevennesses in the object and in the surface along which it moves. These catch at each other and it takes effort to overcome them. Every such catch cuts down the speed of the moving object and therefore decreases its momentum.

This happens very rapidly if a brick is sliding over a rough, wooden floor. It happens very slowly if a smooth metal object is sliding across ice. Eventually, though, if you wait long enough, velocity and momentum decline to zero.

But the momentum has not disappeared. It has been transferred to the atoms making up the surface of the moving body and the surface along which it moves.

Fundamental as the laws of conservation of translational momentum and angular momentum are, there is another which most people consider even more fundamental — perhaps the most fundamental of all the laws of nature. That is the law of conservation of energy, which, among other things, outlaws Aladdin's lamp completely, and I will turn to that next month.

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We don't often see enough good, hard science fiction suspense stories. But this issue's cover story, "Oh, Miranda!" does the trick very well. Written by scientist/writer Charles Pellegrino and writer/editor George Zebrowski, this story features daredevil Lex Bardo. Charles and George are working on a novel and several other stories in this series.

Oh, Miranda!

By Charles Pellegrino and George Zebrowski

"WELL, GO ON—start toward the edge," Cusack's voice said to him.

He waited on what seemed to be an alpine snowfield, sixteen kilometers above the floor of Miranda Canyon. Even at half phase, the giant turquoise ball of Uranus dominated the sky, bathing the landscape in ghostly blue light. Lex Bardo felt small and alone in his space suit as he stood in the shadow of the heavy vehicle.

"If you would be so kind," Cusack said from the safety of the cab, "we'd like to open the line feed to Earth."

Bardo hesitated.

"What is it?" Cusack's voice demanded in his ears. "Are you all right?"

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"I'm fine," Bardo answered in a shaky voice. His throat was dry as he thought of his debts, then reminded himself again that he would not need the physical fitness demanded by his past stunt work.

"Stop worrying," Cusack said. "Didn't I promise we'd pay off your debts no matter what? And if the holo is a success, you'll have yearly payments for as long as the profits roll in."

"You still don't sound convincing," Bardo said.

"We're not asking you to kill yourself."

"That's no better."

Cusack said, "For fifteen minutes the holo of this jump will be the biggest thing to hit the ratings since you skipped a fusion ramjet across Jupiter's Red Spot back in 2016. The profits will save the company. Have you lost your nerve? Get going! You'll be on top again."

Bardo said, "The up-front money has already saved your company."

"So why worry?"

"You'll pay my debts no matter what?"

"Live or die," Cusack said. "How many times do I have to say it? It's all in the contract — out of the first profits."

Sure, Bardo thought, there will be plenty for everyone.

Cusack said, "Stop tormenting yourself. All you have to do now is jump."

If he died, it wouldn't matter, Bardo told himself, wondering about the fickleness of ratings. At the very least, his estate would pay his debts to his fellow creatures. His feelings that he had more in common with credit criminals would be put to rest. His ex-wives would get what he owed them. Cusack was right — there was little chance that he would die, or even be injured.

And his nerve? Cusack knew that he was losing it. When even a Jovian hurricane three times as wide as Earth had failed to make him back off, it was the littlest of things that finally got him — a simple broken neck in a car accident only four blocks from home had staggered him with all the awful force of mortality. Except for a stiff neck, medical technology had saved and repaired him so that no one could tell the difference.

Human laws had always failed him. Anything could happen in the civilized societies of Earth. Maglev drivers regarded traffic rules as mere safety tips. Criminals owned judges. Human affections would always be unreliable. But here in the everblack, where natural laws were the only ones that mattered, he belonged to the cosmos — which could not be bought off or

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influenced, and which would take him back into itself in the end. Airless, lifeless Miranda would give him back his pride and courage, by permitting him one final test against the natural order that had never failed him.

That was the real reason he was here, under this ball of blue vapor four times as wide as Earth, bisected by rings as thin as a spider's web, with auroral streamers blazing on the nightside. The Sun, three light-hours away, was a pea no brighter than the full Moon. Uranus became for a moment an opening into some vast ocean on the far side of space-time . . . .

Little Miranda had barely enough gravitational strength to pull itself into a sphere, yet even in such a weak field, a man stepping off the canyon's edge would accelerate to lethal velocity in three minutes. After an unbroken fall of ten minutes, he would hit bottom, flattening his pressure suit and sprouting geysers of oxygen and red mist for kilometers in every direction, shriveling and dying as quickly as they were born, in the silence common to all airless worlds. On his way down, he'd have time to let out a long, long scream.

Of course, he would not fall the full ten minutes. His backpack of iron balls would slow him down. They were his parachute. He raised his railgun and fired a test shot, launching one of the gleaming spheres dead center at Uranus's equator. The ball fled upward many times faster than the small moon's escape velocity, and the recoil pushed his boots an inch into Miranda's crust. A silvery point of light winked on, brighter than any star, as the slug caught the sunlight and seemed to vanish into the Uranian rings.

"Remember," he said over his radio link, "no chatter. I've got to concentrate."

"Right," Cusack replied.

Bardo faced the automatic cameras on the roof of the cab, raised his arm and waved as the red lights went on, then turned away. His first steps toward the abyss were already beaming toward Earth, Mars, and the Lunar settlements. A great sense of insignificance seized him. It was a trivial thing, after all, to plan and execute stunts. He took pride in the skill, knowledge, and courage required by his work, but it originated nothing. A theory, a painting, a poem or novel contributed something that might last. Holos of his stunts inspired creativity in others, but the holos themselves were not comparable — and he had even failed to keep the money. His claim to fame rested in being willing to do what no one in his right mind would try.

But he was determined to win out this time. Life had taken too much from him for him to fail, he told himself, as he bounded slowly toward the edge of the solar system's highest cliff. Sixteen kilometers straight down, but it

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couldn't be as difficult as it seemed, despite the location and minus-three-hundred-degree temperatures. His equipment was unlikely to fail during the short time he'd be using it. A skydive on Earth was far more dangerous.

He knew in his mind that he could do it, but the rest of his body was beginning to run a separate course, as it dredged up irrational fears with which to paralyze his leg muscles. He *needed* to be here, he told it; diving over the edge would force him to face up to his doubts. When you're cantering a horse toward a fence, you have to believe you can clear it, because the animal will sense your hesitation. You throw your heart over the fence, and the horse will jump after it.

His body's motion became more fluid, building confidence as he bounded slowly forward across the four-hundred-kilometer-wide ball of ice and rock that was Miranda. In his suit, iron balls included, he weighed just over four pounds. But his mass was the same as it would be on Earth, or anywhere else, which made his forward momentum a hundred times more sluggish. Short hops were essential; even a modest kick would send him ten meters into the sky, to drift for twenty-six seconds before touching down again at five kilometers an hour. Every bound carried him sixty-one meters closer to the cliff's edge, and produced a wonderful sense of buoyancy that could be as deadly as his doubts.

A successful jump required that he build up to a forward motion of just a little over three meters per second, so he would clear the cliff's edge and not crash back into its face on the way down. Even though he weighed only four pounds, a sixty-five-kilometer-per-hour collision would still carry all the mass of his four hundred Earth pounds of iron and flesh behind it, and would be as bad as a car wreck back home. Even a slight brush against the cliff might damage his suit.

His sixth hop brought him to the point of no return; if fear welled up now and became uncontrollable, causing him to stiffen or hesitate, his mass would topple him forward on the seventh hop, and he would skid and bump for over a kilometer and go over face down, too near the edge. On worlds of Miranda's scant mass, the laws of motion required nearly a kilometer of twenty or thirty gentle steps for him to stop.

Thirty meters from the edge, he glanced left and right. Two camera balls floated at his sides like faithful dogs. Behind one, auroral streamers blazed, the last screams of electrons from the Sun plunging down twisting magnetic-field lines to collide with the Uranian atmosphere. He pushed off from Miranda's

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frost layer and sailed into open space. The camera balls followed his arc.

For fifteen minutes, he told himself, when the beam reached the inner solar system, everyone would know his name again.

He felt suspended in the first three seconds, flying out only nine meters from the cliff's edge and dropping down less than half a meter. Warm exhilaration welled up in him. Horse and rider were one as the seconds slowed. There was plenty of time for sight-seeing, he realized as he puffed his attitude jets and turned to face the cliff. Most of his motion was still horizontal, so he was dropping only centimeters per second. Ten slow seconds later, he was still level with the top of the cliff, thirty-one meters away.

Suddenly it seemed impossible that a sixteen-kilometer-high cliff should be here. From the ship, it had been a patch of grooves radiating from three points, much like ripples spreading from a stone tossed into a pond — except that these ripples were 161 kilometers across and seemed to have frozen in mid-stride across the cratered terrain, with the canyon at the edge of one ripple, where internal compression had cracked the crust and thrown up towering cliffs. No one had been able to explain to him what had caused the ripple, and he doubted that anyone really knew.

During the next twenty seconds, he fired the suit stabilizers to keep his feet pointed downward. The display on his faceplate showed that he had sailed out ninety-one meters and down forty-three meters in the first half minute. His vertical velocity caught up with his horizontal as he reached the end of the arc. Time quickened with the surge of adrenalin, and his brain accepted the fact that he was falling.

The camera balls fired their subtle jets and kept pace. He waved to them as he fell at a lazy twenty-one kilometers per hour. The edge of the cliff was nearly 183 meters overhead now, framed by Uranus's impossibly narrow rings. It occurred to him that in his favorite antique — the 1967 Dodge Dart with its slant-six engine — he could drive off that cliff at the 193 and some kilometers per hour needed to leap the canyon and make orbit around Miranda. Of course, he would need a few oxygen tanks to burn the gas, and a garage-sized boulder tied to the luggage rack to give the tires enough traction . . . .

Pay attention, he warned himself. Time enough to dream about new stunts after you come out of this one alive. He called up the operations display. Letters and numbers flashed across his faceplate, revealing that no backup system had been called into play. The action display flashed:

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TIME: 2.0 MINUTES
DEPTH: .80465 KILOMETERS
VELOCITY: 41.8418 KILOMETERS PER HOUR

Three hundred and seventy-seven meters away, features on the canyon wall were scrolling upward. Over to the right, something bigger than a house had left a splash mark. There was no telling when it had happened. Perhaps millions of years ago, while dinosaurs roamed Montana, a chunk of ice had been dislodged from above. It had come down lazily, hitting the wall two minutes later, then continued to the bottom. He was falling in a parallel path to that ancient boulder.

A warning buzzer went off in his ear. Startled, he jerked back. His feet began to windmill up. He fired all his attitude-control thrusters and restored balance.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Sorry," Cusack replied, "but we have a problem." As if on cue, the second camera ball zoomed into a position ten meters above him and kept pace, shooting him with the yawning canyon's floor as a backdrop.

His faceplate display suddenly showed a schematic of his railgun. One of the magnetic coils blinked red. The image faded and was replaced by a close-up diagram of the coil and its surroundings, with captions. One of the gun's fifty coils had popped out of line. He swung the gun down and pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Don't panic! Deep-wired experience repressed all fear and freed him to concentrate on the equipment that he had helped design and build. He opened the casing —

TIME: 3.0 MINUTES
DEPTH: 1.6093 KILOMETERS
VELOCITY: 64.372 KILOMETERS PER HOUR

— and saw the faulty coil in the one unit that had no backup. Something had knocked the doughnut-shaped guide out of line. Conveyed along the magnetic tunnel, the steel balls had to pass through the hole in the doughnut, but its inner wall now projected into the tunnel, and had triggered a computer shutdown of power to prevent an unreliable firing of balls through the ceramic

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coils. But even a faulty firing, he realized at once, would give him a better chance of survival than no firing at all.

He was aware of motion in his peripheral vision as he struggled with the coil. More than three-quarters of a kilometer away, the cliff face was scrolling up faster. From nearly fifteen kilometers below his feet, the canyon floor was rushing up at him like a giant flyswatter. The coil slipped back with dismaying difficulty—and he felt a sickening crunch through his suited fingers, like the vibration of bending, cracking ceramic. He held his breath as he closed the casing panel, aimed the gun at the canyon floor eleven kilometers below, and pressed the trigger.

Nothing.

TIME: 6.0 MINUTES
DEPTH: 6.4372 KILOMETERS

As he reopened the casing, he glimpsed a second splash mark on the cliff face, now over nine hundred meters away, where the ice boulder had preceded him ages ago, dropping, as he was now, at nearly 129 kilometers per hour. The coil came out easily—broken in half. There was a tiny crater on one side, like a zap mark made by a micrometeorite. One of the camera balls came closer and peered at the damaged part.

"Can it be fixed?" Cusack shouted in his ear.

Bardo tried to imagine how, in two minutes or less, he could tape the coil together and make it work. His brain snatched up every image, every sound, pulling forward all the information it could get, spreading it out on the floor of his skull and analyzing the pieces for a way out. He conjured up and rejected half a dozen solutions. At the same time, his eye paused at the zap scar, and he realized that no micrometeor had caused this damage. There were soot trails and burn marks that could have been made only by a microexplosive charge, intended to knock the coil out of joint—not crack it in half—and create a small crisis to jack up the ratings.

TIME: 7 MINUTES

Neat trick, but Cusack lacked experience with microexplosives, and had not made the charge small enough. Bardo faced two choices as he imagined the promoter announcing to the worlds the impending death of the Great Lex

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Bardo. If he repaired the coil as best he could, and it came apart in the gun, the machine would not allow itself to fire; but even if it did fire, it might tear itself apart. His only choice was to try a landing without the coil, at reduced thrust, hoping that there were enough balls in the backpack to make up the difference.

He closed the casing again and flicked the broken doughnut halves at the nearest camera ball, missing.

TIME: 8 MINUTES

He fired three test shots straight down, and felt deceleration. The suit thrusters cut in to keep him vertical. Relieved, he imagined forcing Cusack at gunpoint to strap on the backup railgun, marching him toward the cliff's edge and pushing him over. If he made it safely, there would be no pickup by the mother ship. He would have to climb back.

TIME: 9 MINUTES

The cliff face rolled upward too quickly for him to catch further marks of the boulder's passing. The bottom of the canyon was coming up at nearly 189 kilometers per hour. It would take less than forty seconds to cover the last kilometer. He took a deep breath and fired down three more balls.

Still working.

New details came into view below. A small crater under his left foot grew to reveal itself full of little craters. Five seconds later he saw that one of the craters within the crater was peppered with even smaller ones. He fired two more balls. If the gun failed now, he would make a crater of his own.

One and a half kilometers from the floor, he watched the short horizon, only a few hundred meters away on this worldlet, eating up the far end of the canyon. The canyon floor curved away from him, north and south, slipping over the rim. As the last of it was swallowed, he would hit bottom at nearly 200 kilometers per hour. The camera balls would slow and hover over a ruin of suit and flesh.

He fired — and kept firing. Two hundred, three hundred, four hundred balls lanced down. At 549 meters high, he saw the formation of his craters.

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Four hundred more rounds went off with equal ease, decelerating him smoothly — until suddenly ten thousand twinkling microshards burst from the side of the gun barrel like a snowstorm, and he knew that one of the steel balls had skidded sideways through the magnetic flow, taking out most of the gun's ceramics.

"Jettison gun, slug pack!" he cried to his suit computer. "Reserve oxygen!"

The equipment unsnapped and pinwheeled away. The camera balls pulled back, pacing him.

"Sun visor!" he shouted. "Reserve power pack! Drop fluid." Reducing mass was now the only way left to diminish his impact. He wanted to scream, but held back.

He was about to lose the computer, when he glanced down and noticed that he seemed to have stopped dead in the sky at 153 meters above the canyon floor, then realized that the eight hundred rounds had knocked off most of his speed. He was coming down at less than 5 klicks per hour. He fell for another minute and touched down at a comfortable 24 klicks per hour. Relieved, he stood there and watched his railgun, reserve oxygen pack, and one of the camera balls settle to the powdery ground in front of him.

Cusack cheered in his ear. Bardo restrained himself, determined not to ruin the show as he waved to the cameras and looked around, searching.

About a hundred meters away on the short horizon lay the boulder that had dug the holes in the cliff face. He hopped toward it as if to meet an old friend, followed by both camera balls. Halfway, he slowed and paused in the giant's shadow. The boulder towered six meters above him. He turned on his helmet light and scanned the pitted, icy surface of his precursor. He reached out and touched it reverently, then leaned back carefully and looked up 16 kilometers to his starting point on the bluff's edge. He could almost see it.

Finally he took a deep breath, turned around, and waved to the camera balls, savoring the moments before the ship sent its pod for him. When he saw the vessel shining bright above Uranus, he knew that he had stolen a few moments of glory from the ringed colossus.

* * *

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AS THE ship accelerated toward its one-gravity boost for the return to Earth, Bardo went to Cusack's cabin.

"Come in, come in," the promoter said, casually clearing his message screen. "You did a great piece of work out there," he added, and Bardo realized with a shock that Cusack did not suspect that his sabotage had been discovered.

He turned around, and Bardo grabbed him around the throat with one hand. Cusack drooled, trying to speak as Bardo tightened his grip. "I should have taken you out there and made you jump!"

"Lemme talk," Cusack managed to whisper.

Bardo relaxed his grip just enough. "Make it fast."

"I knew you'd make it!" Cusack shouted. "It was a compliment."

"Did you really believe I wouldn't see it was sabotage?"

"I had faith you'd come through no matter what. We had a great show!"

Bardo smiled. "You'd have had that if I lived or died. It didn't matter that I might get killed." He tightened his grip again and started to lift the man from the floor.

"Please!" Cusack shrieked.

Bardo lowered him and loosened his grip. "What can you possibly say to me that'll make a difference?"

A look of terrified triumph came into Cusack's eyes. Bardo let him go out of curiosity.

"I'm sorry," Cusack said, massaging his throat. "It was a piece of idiocy, I admit, but it helped make success sweeter, at least for you, didn't it? I've helped restore your self-esteem. Look at yourself. You're a powerful beast again, ready to kill."

"You were always too clever with words," Bardo said. "What were you doing when I came in?"

Cusack looked worried again. "Looking out for you."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't get violent again," Cusack said, backing toward the screen.

Bardo nodded and sat down on the bunk as Cusack collapsed into the workstation chair and said, "I made sure your money was transferred into your account. It'll be going out to your creditors tomorrow, but I made sure you'd have some left. Consider it a bonus for the extra danger."

"What are you saying?"

"This is it. There won't be any more money. The production company's

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in the same position as you. Earnings are going out to pay its debts, and then there's no more company. It's closing down. It won't be there by the time we get home."

Bardo's stomach knotted as his anger struggled to break free, but he held it back. In his own way, Cusack had done him a favor; by itself the jump would have been too easy. "My debts are paid?" he asked.

Cusack looked at him gratefully. "As soon as that signal reaches Earth. You'll be a free man when you get home. I'll even manage you for a while, if you want — just to help you retire. There're lots of ways you can earn money without doing stunts."

Bardo looked at him and saw a desperate man. "I should kill you or slap you with a lawsuit."

"And what would that get you?"

"You're in a fix also, aren't you?"

Cusack nodded. "I'll need a job."

"Tell me, do you think anyone in the company is walking away with money?"

"Probably, but we couldn't prove it. Once its creditors draw the money, the company disappears into a black hole. It was set up that way. Your jump made it possible."

And then there was nothing left to say. Bardo wondered if all this was only Cusack's ploy to keep him quiet. He wouldn't know until he got home, three weeks from now.

He rose, and Cusack seemed to shrink into his chair, but relaxed as Bardo backed toward the exit.

"Good night," Bardo said, feeling exhausted in the increasing gravity.

"Get some sleep, Lex," Cusack said behind him as the door slid open. Bardo stumbled out, stepped across the passage, and palmed open the door to his cabin.

In his bunk he listened to the distant whine of the ship's torchjet and was unable to imagine his modest life of retirement, then toyed with the idea of getting new backers to help him return to Miranda and race his 1967 Dodge Dart off the same cliff. Sleep brought epic dreams, in which he rode a submersible 3,000 klicks deep into the oceans of Uranus, seeking carbon in the only form allowed by such immense pressures — diamonds of sapphire pink, orange, and blue — as large as office blocks. Outrageous

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feats contorted his sleeping body, which would always remember and crave motion. Small, distant voices sang to him as he struggled with the animus of his needs, assuring him that he would dive into death without fear, when it came one day like that slow, silent fall on Miranda.

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When Ed Ferman hired me to edit F&SF, we reached an impasse over my own fiction. He wanted to continue publishing it; I said I wasn't capable of editing it (I always think my writing brilliant when it isn't, and awful when it isn't). We compromised. He continues to edit and buy my work for F&SF.

I am and always have been a writer first. My previous appearances in F&SF include "Phantom" (June 1989), and "Inspiration" (November 1990). My first novel, The White Mists of Power (Roc), *will appear this fall. "Dancers Like Children" continues the theme of the issue with a science fiction mystery that examines the relationship between children and aliens.*

DANCERS LIKE CHILDREN

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

I

I LIE IN THIS COOL BED ON Lina Base, my body coated with burn creams and wrapped in light bandages in the areas where the skin grafts have yet to take. I told my counselor that every time I wake up, I remember something else. I told her that I wanted to make notes, to organize my thoughts before the second round of questions begin. This morning she brought me the small, voice-activated computer that hangs on the side of my bed rail. I don't know if someone else can access what I write; I suspect anyone can. I don't care. I do need to get organized, for myself. I need to write down the entire story my way before too many questions taint it. I used to counsel my own patients to do that — fifteen years ago, when I was Justin Schafer, Ph.D., instead of Dr. Schafer, the man whose name is spoken in a cool, dismissive tone.

Fifteen years ago. When I had friends, respect, and a future, when

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people believed in me, even more than I believed in myself.

II

THEY BROUGHT me in after the fifth murder.

The shuttle dropped me on the landing site at the salt cliffs, overlooking the golden waters of the Singing Sea. Apparently, something in the shuttle fuel harmed the vegetation near the small colony, so they developed a landing strip on the barren cliff tops at the beginning of the desert. Winds and salt had destroyed the plastic shelter, so I wore the required body scarf and some specially developed reflective cream. Before he left, the shuttle pilot pointed out the domed city in the distance. He said he had radioed them to send someone for me. I clutched my water bottle tightly, refusing to drink until I was parched.

A hot, dry breeze rustled the scarf around my face. The breeze smelled of daffodils, or so it seemed. It had been so long since I had been to Earth, I was no longer sure what daffodils smelled like.

The desert spanned between me and the domed city. I wasn't sure if the reflections I saw were dome lights or a mirage. To my left, salt continually eroded down the cliff face, little crystals rolling and tumbling to the white beach below. The Singing Sea devoured the crystals, leaving a salt scum that reflected the harsh light of the sun. I wondered if this was where, decades ago, the miners had begun their slaughter of the Dancers. The Dancers were a protected species now, perhaps one one-hundredth of their original numbers.

This place had a number of protected species, but most lived far away from the colony. The only known Dancer habitat was at the edge of the domed city. All the materials sent to me on Minar Base pointed to the Dancers as the cause of the murders. The colonists wanted me to make a recommendation that would be used in a preliminary injunction, a recommendation on whether the Dancers had acted with malicious intent. That idea left me queasy and brought the dreams back.

I glanced back at the barren brown land leading to the dome. The colonists called this Bountiful. Colonists who escaped the planet called it the Gateway to Hell. I could understand why, with the endless heat, the oxygen-poor air, and the salt-polluted water. Just before I left the base, I spoke with an old man who had spent his childhood on this planet. The

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old man's skin was shriveled and dried from too many hours in an unkind sun. He ate no salt, and he filled his quarters with fresh, cool water. He said he was so relieved to become an adult, because then he could legally escape the planet. He had warned me to stay away. And if I had had a choice, I would never have come.

"Justin Schafer?"

I turned. A woman stood at the edge of the trail leading back to the dome. Her body-length white sand scarf fluttered with the breeze.

"I'm Netta Goldin. I'm to take you to the colony."

"We're walking?"

She smiled. "The ecology here is fragile. We have learned to accept a number of inconveniences." The reflective white cream gathered in the lines on her face, making her appear creased. "I hear they brought you in from the base near Minar. Minar is supposed to be lovely."

"They closed the planet almost a decade ago." A shiver went through me. Minar was lovely, and I hated it. "Your name is familiar."

"I'm the head of the colony."

I remembered now. The scratchy female voice over the telecorder. "Then you're the one who had me brought in."

She adjusted my scarf hood. The heat seemed to increase, but the prickling on my scalp stopped. "You're the best person for the job."

"I deal in human aberration. You need a specialist."

"No." She threaded her arm through mine and walked down the trail. The salt crunched beneath our feet. "I need someone who knows human and xeno psychology. You seem to be the only one left on either nearby base."

"I thought you were convinced the natives are doing this."

"I think the deaths have happened because of interaction between our people and the Dancers. It's clear that the Dancers killed the children, but we don't know why. I want you to investigate those dynamics. I also want this done fast. I want to do something about the Dancers, protect my people better than I am now. But I understand that you need to investigate the natives in their own environment, so we have taken no action."

The wind played with my sand scarf. A runnel of sweat trickled down my back. "I'm not licensed to practice xenopsychology."

"That's a lie, Dr. Schafer. I researched you rather heavily before I went to the expense of bringing you here. The Ethics Committee suspended your license for one year as a formality. That was nine years ago. You're

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still licensed, and still interested in the field."

I pulled my arm from hers. I had sat by the sea that first morning on Minar, too. I had been thirty years old and so sure I could understand everyone, human or alien. And I did understand, finally, too late.

"I don't want to do this job," I said.

"You're the only one who can do it." She had clasped her hands behind her back. "All the other xenopsychologists in the quadrant have specialized in one species or refuse to do forensic work. Besides, no one is better at this than you."

"They charged me with inciting genocide on Minar."

"And acquitted you. Your actions were logical, given the evidence."

Logical. I should have seen how the land encroached, poisoned, ate away human skin. We learned later that Minaran skin oils were also acidic, but didn't cause the same kind of damage. The original colonists had died first because of land poisoning, not because the Minarans were acting on an old vendetta. All the work the natives had done, they had done to save the colonists. I had ascribed a human motive — the wrong human motive — and had decimated a sentient race. "I don't want to make the same mistake again."

"Good," she said. The wind blew her scarf across her face. She brushed the cloth away with a cream-covered hand. "Because then you won't."

III

THE COOL air in the meeting room smelled of metallic processing. I shifted in my chair. Despite the reflective cream and clothing, my skin had turned a blotchy red. My scalp itched. Little raised bumps had formed underneath my hair. I was afraid to touch them, afraid they might burst.

I glanced at the others. Davis, a thin, wiry man from Lina Base, headed the laboratory team. Sanders, head of the medical unit, had hands half the size of mine. I found myself staring at her, wondering how someone so petite could spend her time sifting through the clues left in a dead body. And of course, Netta. Her hair was dark, her skin bronzed by the planet's sun. Netta had brought them all in to brief me. The only person missing was the head of the city's security.

The artificial lighting seemed pale after the brightness of the sun. The

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building was made of old white terraplastic — the kind colonists brought with them to form temporary structures until they could build from the planet's natural materials. Wood and stone were not scarce commodities here, yet it was almost as if the original colonists had been afraid to use anything native.

Finally a small man, his hair greased back and his face darkened by the sun, entered. He dumped papers and holotubes on the desk in front of Netta. "Thank you," she said. She pushed her chair back and caught the small man by the arm. "Justin, this is D. Marvin Tanner. He heads the security forces for this area. If you have any questions about the investigative work prior to this time, you should direct those questions to him."

Tanner's gaze darted around the room, touching everyone but settling on no one. I wondered what made Tanner so nervous. He had worked with the others. I was the only new person in the room.

"Most of what I will tell you is in your packet, for your own personal review later," Netta said. "But let me give you a general briefing now before we show the holos." She let go of Tanner's arm. He sat down next to me. He smelled of sweat and cologne. "They found the first victim three Earth months ago. Linette Bisson was eleven years old. She had been propped against the front door of her home like a rag doll. Someone had removed her hands, heart, and lungs.

"The next victim, David Tomlinson, appeared three weeks later. Same M.O. Three more children — Katie Dengler, Andrew Liser, and Henry Illn — were found two weeks apart. Again, same M.O. These children all played together. They were the same age. And, according to their parents, none of the last three seemed too terribly frightened by the deaths of their friends."

She paused, glanced at me. Children often had no concept of death, and the things they feared were not the things adults feared. That the children were not frightened had less significance for me than it seemed to have for Netta.

"The Dancers mature differently than we do," Sanders said. Her voice was soft and as delicate as she was. "They do grow, a little, but their heart, lungs, and hands work like our teeth. The old ones must be removed before the new ones can grow into place. They have developed an elaborate rite of passage that ends with the ceremonial removal of the adolescent's organs."

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I turned to Netta. "You said the Dancers interacted with the colonists."

She nodded. "For decades we've had an informal relationship. They develop the herbs we use in our exports. We haven't had any trouble, until now."

"And the Dancers were allowed inside the dome?"

"We restricted them when the killings started, and now they're not allowed at all."

"We also set up dome guards," Tanner said. "The dome doors have no locks and can be operated from the inside or the outside. We had done that as a precaution so no colonist would die trapped outside the dome."

Colonists, colony. Fascinating the way that language had not evolved here. The "colony" had been settled for nearly a century. Gradually, it should have eased into "settlement" or "city." The domed area had no name, and even people like Tanner, who had lived on the planet their entire lives, felt no sense of permanence.

"We have some holos we'd like to show you," Tanner said. He had set up the equipment at the edge of the table. He moved chairs and a garbage can away from the wall, leaving a wide, blank space. He flicked on the switch, and a holo leaped into being before us.

Laughter filled the room, children's laughter. Twelve children huddled on the floor, playing a game I did not recognize. The children all appeared the same age, except for one, who sat off to one side and watched. He appeared to be about eight. The older children would pound their fists on the ground three times, then touch hands. One child would moan or roll away. The others would laugh.

Tanner froze the image. "These are the children," he said. He moved near the images, stopping by a slim, blonde girl whose face was bright with laughter. "Linette Bisson," he said. Then he moved to a solid boy with rugged features who was leaning forward, his hand in a small fist. "David Tomlinson."

Tanner moved to the next child, his body visible through the holos in front of him. I shivered. Seeing the living Tanner move through the projected bodies of dead children raised hackles on the back of my neck. Superstition. Racial memory. My ancestors believed in ghosts.

He looked at a dark-haired girl who frowned at the little boy who sat alone. "Katie Dengler. Beside her, Andrew Liser and Henry Illn." The boys were rolling on the ground, holding their stomachs. Their mirth would

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have been catching if I hadn't known the circumstances of their deaths.

Tanner went back to the holojecter.

"Who are the other children?" I asked. At least eight were not accounted for.

"You'll meet them," Netta said. "They still run together."

I nodded and watched. Tanner switched images, and the projection moved again. The children's clothing changed. They wore scarves and reflective cream. A middle-aged woman with sun-black skin stood beside them. "Do as I say," she said. "Nothing more." They turned their backs on me and walked past trees and houses until the dome appeared. The woman flicked a switch, and the dome rose. The children waved, and the dome closed behind them. The younger boy ran into the picture, but an adult suddenly appeared and stopped him.

Tanner froze the image. I stared at the boy, seeing the dejection in his shoulders. I had stood like that so many times since Minar, watching my colleagues move to other projects, while I had to stay behind.

"We think this is the first time the Dancers met with the children," Tanner said.

"Who is that boy?" I asked.

"Katie Dengler's brother. Michael."

"And the woman?"

"Latona Etanl. She's a member of the Extra-Species Alliance." Netta answered that question. Her voice dripped with bitterness. "She believed that having the children learn about the Dancers would ease relations between us."

I glanced at her. "There have been problems?"

"No. The Alliance believes that we are abusing the Dancers because we do not understand their culture." Netta leaned back in her chair, but her body remained tense. "I thought we had a strong cooperative relationship until she tried to change things."

I frowned. The Alliance was a small, independent group with bases on all settled planets. Theoretically, the Alliance was supposed to promote understanding between the colonists and the natives. In some areas, Alliance members spent so much time with the natives that they absorbed and practiced native beliefs. On those lands the Alliance became a champion for the downtrodden native. In other lands the group assisted the colonists in systematically destroying native culture. And sometimes

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the group actually fulfilled its mission. The Alliance representatives I had met were as varied as the planets they worked on.

"How long ago was this holo taken?" I asked.

"Almost a year," Tanner said. "But the children weren't as taken with the Dancers as Latona thought they would be. I believe that was the only visit."

"What has changed since then? What has provoked the Dancers?"

Netta glanced at Tanner. She sighed. "We want to take control of the xaredon, leredon, and ededon plants."

The basis of Salt Juice, the colonists' chief export. Salt Juice was one of the most exhilarating intoxicants the galaxy had ever known. It mixed quickly with the bloodstream, left the user euphoric, and had no known side effects: no hangovers, no hallucinations, no addictions, and no dangerous physical responses. That export alone brought in a small fortune. "I didn't know the Dancers controlled the herbs," I said.

"They grow the herbs and give us the adult plants. We've been trying to get them to teach us to grow the plants, but they refuse." Netta shook her head. "I don't know why, either. We don't pay them. We don't give them anything for their help."

"And the negotiations broke off?"

"About a week before the first death." The deep voice surprised me. It belonged to Davis. I had forgotten he was there.

Another fact that I would have to investigate. I was developing quite a mental checklist.

"Let me show you the final image," Tanner said. "It's of the first death. You can see the others if you want in the viewing library. This one begins the pattern carried through on the rest."

He clicked the image. The scene in front of me was grim. Linette, her hair longer and sun-blonde, her skin darker than it had been in the first projection, leaned against one of the terraformed doors. Her feet stretched out in front of her; her arms rested at her sides. Her chest was open, dark, and matted with blood. Tanner froze the projection, and this time I got up, examining the holo from all sides. The stumps at the ends of her arms were blood-covered. Her clothing was also bloodstained, but that could have been caused by her bleeding arms. Blood did coat the chest cavity, though. Whoever had killed her had acted quickly. The girl's eyes were wide and had an inquisitive expression. Her mouth was drawn in a slight O of surprise or pain.

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"The wounds match the wounds made by Dancer ceremonial tools," Davis said. "I can show you more down in the lab later if you want."

I nodded, feeling sick. "Please shut that off," I said. Tanner flicked a switch, and the image disappeared. Five children, dead and mutilated. I had to get out of the room. I had received too much information, and seen too much. My stomach threatened to betray me. The others stared at me.

"This packet and the information you've given so far should be enough for me to get started," I said. I stood up and clutched the chair for support. "I'm sure that I will return with questions." I let myself out of the room and took a deep breath. The image of the child remained at the edge of my brain, mingling with that of other dead colonists on a world ten years away.

I heard rustling inside the conference room, and knew I had to be gone before they emerged. I hurried through the dimly lit corridor. Sunlight glared through the cracks around the outside door. I stopped and examined the almost inch-wide space between the door and its frame, forcing myself to think about things other than holographic images. Clearly, the people who lived inside the dome had no fear of the elements or of each other. Anyone, or anything, could open that door by wedging something inside the crack.

I felt better outside the room. The people inside made me feel uncomfortable. They had discovered what they could through instruments and measures and other "scientific" things. I had to crawl inside alien minds and see what had caused such murders. If the colonists had suspected a human killer, they would have brought any one of half a dozen other specialists to the planet. Instead they had brought me.

I had to see the Dancers clearly, without dead Minarans clouding my vision. If the Dancers killed with malicious intent, the colony had to be protected or moved. I would simply approach things differently this time. Instead of going to the leaders of the colony, I would go to Galactic Security. That might prevent slaughter. The Dancers, with their small population, were easier prey than the Minarans.

I stepped outside and blinked at the blue-tinted light. The dome filtered the sunlight, deflecting the dangerous ultraviolet rays and allowing only a modicum of heat inside. Roses grew beside the door, and young maples lined the walks. Patches of grass peeked through, hidden by bushes and other flowering plants. The care that the colonists had not placed in their

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homes, they had placed in making the interior of the dome look like Earth. It felt odd to stand here, among familiar trees and lush vegetation, and to know that just outside the dome, a different alien world waited.

I crouched beside the roses and put my hand in the soil. Perhaps it was less alkaline than the salt cliffs had led me to believe. Or perhaps the colonists had imported the soil, as they had imported everything else. I saw no reason to live in a new place if I were going to try so hard to make it look like the place I had left. That attitude was a difference between me and the colonists. I would collect thousands of differences before I was through. The problem was whether thousands were enough or if they meant anything at all. The differences I had to concentrate on were the differences between human and Dancer thought. Something that should have taken a lifetime to study, I would have to discover in a matter of weeks.

IV

THAT NIGHT I dreamed of the Minarans. Their sleek sealbodies dripped with water. They hovered around me, oversized eyes reproachful, as if they were trying to warn me of something I would never understand. They reached out to touch me, and I slapped their fingered fins away. Shudders ran through my body. They had caused the murders. But I knew if I told the colonists, they would slaughter the Minarans — the fat mothers, the tiny males, and the white pups that, not that much earlier, the children had watched as if they were pets. Minaran blood was colorless but thick. It still coated my hands, leaving them sticky and useless.

I blinked myself awake. A fan whirred in the darkness. The blanket covering me was scratchy and too hot. I coughed, and tasted metallic air in the back of my throat. The apartment Netta had given me seemed small and close.

I had done nothing right since the Minaran trial. I should have resigned from psychology, let my licenses lapse, and bought back my contract. I had had the money then. I hadn't had to serve out my time on Minar Base, the planet hovering in my viewscreen like an ugly reminder. Instead I stayed, wrote abstracts and papers, conducted studies, and worked with an intensity that I hadn't known I had. My colleagues ignored

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me, and I tried to ignore myself. Just before she left me, Carol accused me of idolizing the Minarans. She said that I had buried my emotions in the search for the cause of my own flaws. Perhaps I did idolize the Minarans, and I knew that I had stored my emotions far away from myself. But I thought I knew the cause of my own flaws. I didn't hide in my work. I liked to think that I was atoning.

I rolled over. The sheets were cool on the far side of the bed. Maybe my sense of guilt allowed me to let my contract safeguards lapse so that someone like Netta could buy my services for the next Earth year. The darkness seemed to close around me, press on me. When I closed my eyes, I saw the Minarans.

I could, I supposed, cancel the contract and head to Lina Base for reeducation, never to practice psychology again. But the work was all I had. Perhaps I was atoning. Or perhaps I hadn't learned.

V

I ROSE EARLY and drank my coffee outside, watching the colony wake up. I sat on the stoop of the apartment building, looking over some sort of evergreen bush at the street beyond. The apartments were clearly for guests of the colony. I had heard no one in the building during the night, and no one passed me on the way to work.

The streets were full, however. Adults carrying satchels and briefcases walked by, chatting. Others wore grubby clothes and carried nothing. A few wore sand scarves and helped each other apply reflective cream. Work seemed to start at the same time. I would have wagered that the workday ended at the same time, too.

In my wanderings I had noticed no taverns and no restaurants, no place for the colonists to gather and socialize after the workday had ended. I wondered what the colonists did for recreation besides garden.

I got up, went inside, and put my mug into the washer. Then I went back outside. The last of the stragglers had gone up the street, and in the near silence, I heard a squeal of laughter, followed by a child's voice. I followed the sound. It didn't seem too far away. The laughter came again, and again, guiding me to it. I walked the opposite direction of the workers, past terraplastic homes with no windows, large gardens that passed for lawns, and fences dividing property. The laughter grew closer. I turned

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and saw a small corner park, marked off by three weeping willows. Flowers grew like a fence along the walkway, and inside, on the grass, about ten children sat in a circle, playing the game I had seen them play on the hologram.

One child stood back, leaning on the gate. He was tall for his age, but the longing expression on his face made him seem even younger than he was. I wondered if my face used to look like that on nights after the Minar trial, when I used to pass my colleagues in the middle of heated round-table discussions. I suppressed a sigh and stood beside the boy. It took a moment for me to recall his name. Michael Dengler.

"What are they playing?"

He glanced over at me, seemingly surprised that someone would talk to him. "Race."

The children pounded their fists on the ground three times, then made different hand gestures. They laughed. I watched the muscles bulge in their arms, wondering what kind of exercise program they were on. One girl rolled away, stood up, arched her back, and growled. "Limabog!" "Arachni!" "Cat!" "Illnea!" the children called. At each name the girl shook her head. Finally someone yelled, "Bear!" She nodded, joined the circle again, and the fist pounding started all over.

"How do you play?" I asked.

His frown grew until his entire face turned blood-red. "I don't," he said.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and for a moment I heard the hushed whispers of former friends gossiping about my failures. I swallowed, determined to distance myself from the boy. "Don't you play with friends your own age?"

Michael stopped leaning on the fence. "You're one of the strangers here for the Salt Juice, aren't you?"

I gave a half-nod, not bothering to correct his misconception.

"You got kids?"

"No," I said.

He shrugged. "Then it stays the same. I'm the only kid my age. My mom and dad didn't follow the rules."

The children burst into laughter, and another child rolled away, this time approaching the group on all fours. Apparently, this colony still followed the practice of having children in certain age groups, then spacing the next group at least four years away. It was a survival tactic for many new colonies.

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"So you want to play with the older kids," I said.

"Yeah." I could feel the wistfulness in his voice. He watched from the outside; I had written papers about other people's work. Michael glanced over at the children, his hands clenching. "But they won't let me play until I grow and learn to think like a big kid. Mom says they should take me for who I am." He looked at me, his mouth set in a thin line. "What do you think?"

Such an easy question, asked to the wrong person. I had always thought for myself, and it had gained me respect and a following — until Minar. After that, I stood at the edge of the roundtable discussions instead of leading them, waiting for someone to pull back a chair and let me in. If I had said I was sorry, opened myself up for dissection, perhaps I wouldn't be standing friendless on an unfamiliar planet.

"In the ideal world, your mom is right," I said. "But sometimes you have to do what the group wants if you're going to be accepted."

Michael crossed his arms in front of his chest, his fists still clenched. His body language made his thoughts clear: he didn't want to believe what I said. I wouldn't have, either, in his position, but I hoped he would take my advice. Standing outside the group, watching, was much more painful than playing inside.

"Could you explain the game to me?" I asked softly.

"No!" He spun, started down the pathway. "Maybe they will. They talk to grown-ups."

He half-ran away from me. I almost started after him, then let him go. The boy reached me because I saw a similarity between us. He didn't have a lot to do with my investigation.

The children laughed behind me as if they hadn't noticed his outburst. I took Michael's place at the fence and watched, to see if I could learn the game from observation before I tried talking with the children.

VI

BY MIDDAY the dome filter changed, giving the colony a sepia tone. The children had refused to talk to me, running when I approached. I decided that I would get Netta to arrange a time for me to talk with them. Then I walked to the office of the Extra-Species Alliance, hoping to talk to Latona Etanl.

The office was clearly marked, one of the few buildings with any

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identification at all. Tulips and lilies of the valley blossomed across the yard, and two maple trees shaded the pathway. The office building itself was made of terraplastic, but it seemed larger, perhaps because of the windows beside the door.

I mounted the stoop and saw, through the window, a woman get up from her desk. The door swung open in front of me, and I found myself staring at the woman from the holos. I recognized her sun-blackened face. It took me a moment to realize she wasn't wearing a sand scarf. Her long black hair went down to her knees and wrapped around her like a second skin.

"Ms. Etanl," I said, "I'm—"

"You're Dr. Schafer. I've been waiting for you." She stood away from the door, and I stepped inside.

The room had the rich, potent aroma of lilies of the valley. A bunch of flowers was gathered in a vase by the window. Other vases rested on end tables beside the wide couch and easy chairs that filled the rest of the space. A hallway opened beyond the desk, leading to other, smaller rooms. The sepia-colored light shining through the windows made the outdoors muddy and the interior even brighter than it should have been.

"Your offices are lovely," I said to cover my surprise at her greeting.

"We like to have pleasant surroundings," she said, and I thought I heard a kind of condemnation in her voice. "Care for a seat?"

She moved over to one of the easy chairs and waited for me to follow. I sat on the couch, sinking into the soft cushions. She sat down at the edge of her seat, looking as if she were going to spring up at a moment's notice.

"Ms. Etanl—"

"Latona."

"Latona. I'm surprised you knew who I was."

"The colony's small. And Netta told us you would come." She adjusted her hair over her legs as if it were a skirt. "She blames me for taking the children out of the colony. She thinks I started the Dancers on this."

Latona hadn't looked at me. "What do you think?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think the Dancers are capable of such killings."

"From my understanding," I said slowly, "Dancers don't kill their young. They perform the mutilations to help adolescents reach maturity. Could something have happened in that one meeting that would have

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made the Dancers try to help human children?"

She finally looked at me. Her eyes were wide and black, the color of her hair. "You haven't seen the Dancers yet, have you?"

I shook my head.

"You need to. And then you can ask me questions." She took a deep breath, as if hesitating about what she was about to say. "I'll take you if you like."

"Now?"

She nodded. "We have protective gear in the back."

My heart thudded against my chest. I hadn't expected to see the Dancers yet, but I was ready. A little thrill ran down my spine.

We got up, and she led me down the hall to one of the black offices. As she walked past an open office door, she peeked inside. A man sat behind a desk, his bald head bowed over a small computer screen. "Daniel, I'm taking Dr. Schafer to see the Dancers."

He glanced up, and I realized he was younger than I first thought — thirty or less. "Would you like a second?"

She shook her head. "Unless he thinks we need one."

She was asking me a question without directing it at me. I shook my head. "If she thinks the two of us will be fine, I'm not going to second-guess."

Daniel smiled, showing a row of very white teeth. "Latona is our best. She's studied the Dancers her entire life."

Latona had already started down the hall. I nodded at Daniel, then followed her. The room she entered was the size of a small closet. She flicked on a light and pulled two sand scarves from pegs. She took out a jar of reflective cream and handed it to me. I applied it. The goo was cold against my face, and smelled faintly sweet. Then I wrapped the sand scarf around me and waited as Latona did the same. She tied a small pack to her waist. Finally she pulled two pairs of sunglasses out of a drawer and handed me one.

"Put these on after we leave the dome," she said.

We left through a door on the back side. The sepia tone of the dome seemed to have grown darker. Latona led me across the yard along an empty pathway until we reached the dome. Two men stood beside the structure, looking bored. Latona nodded at them.

"I'm taking Dr. Schafer to see the Dancers."

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"Netta permit this?" one of the men asked.

Latona sighed. "She doesn't have to. Dr. Schafer is off-world."

The man looked as if he were about to say more, but his partner grabbed his arm. He pushed a button, and the dome door slid open. Dry heat seeped in, making the air inside the dome feel as plastic as the buildings. I followed Latona outside and heard the doors squeak closed behind us.

Sunlight reflected off the white cream on my face, momentarily blinding me. The wind rustled my sand scarf. I already felt overdressed. The air smelled of salt, daffodils, and promises.

Latona tugged her hood over her face and headed into the wind. I bent and followed, wishing that I could see more of the desert. But the wind was strong and blew the sand at a dangerous rate. I put on the glasses, thankful for the way they eased the glare.

"Netta hates it when I visit the Dancers," Latona said, "but she can't stop me. I'm not officially a colony member. Neither are you."

"Why did you bring the children out here?" The sand was deep and thick, and I was having trouble walking.

Latona seemed to follow no trail. "There are a lot of creatures on this planet that the colonists ignore. Little sand devils that burrow tunnels below the surface, birds with helicopterlike wings, and insects. Daniel is studying the birds to see if they're intelligent. Micah, one of my other colleagues, has determined that the sand devils are not. But the Dancers are intelligent, in their own way."

The sand became thin and packed, almost a mudlike surface. I glanced back. The dome was a small bubble in the distance.

"The early miners hated the Dancers and killed them. The killing stopped, though, when the colonists discovered Salt Juice."

"This is history," I said. My voice sounded breathless. "I want to know about now."

"I'm getting to now. The Dancers grow the herbs for Salt Juice, and although the colonists have tried, they can't. So they need the Dancers as another intelligent species. The colonists take the plants without recompense, and the Dancers just grow more. I know some of the colonists think the children's deaths are retaliation."

"And you don't think so."

Latona shook her head. "That's a human reaction. The Dancers are

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My heart pounded against my chest. The Dancers surrounded us and touched us lightly.

a different species. They have very alien thought processes."

The wind had eased, but my skin felt battered. I brought a hand up to my cheek and felt sand on the cream. Sweat ran down my back, and my throat was dry. "You have water in the pack?" I asked.

Latona stopped, opened the pack, and handed me a small plastic bottle. I saw others lined in rows of six. I put the bottle to my lips and drank. The water was flat and warm, but the wetness felt good. I handed the bottle back to Latona, and she finished the water, putting the empty bottle into her pack.

"We're almost there," she said. "I want you to do what I tell you and nothing else. The Dancers will come when I call them, and will touch you. They're only trying to see what you are. Their fingers are more sensitive than their eyes."

We stepped into a shadowy darkness, and it took me a moment to realize that we had reached trees. They had dark, spindly trunks, wind-whipped and twisted. Sand caught in the ridges, making the trees look scarred. The tops of the trees unfolded like umbrellas, the ropelike leaves entangled and braided to form a canopy. Latona took her hood down, removed her glasses, and whistled.

Dark shapes approached from ahead of us. I let my hood down and pocketed my sunglasses. The creatures weren't walking, although they were upright. They almost glided along the hard-packed sand, their feet barely touching. The creatures had long, twig-thin bodies with shiny black skin, two legs, two arms, and a wide, oblong head with large silver eyes. It was easy to see why the colonists had called them dancers; they moved with a fluid grace, as if they made every step in time to a music that I couldn't hear.

My heart pounded against my chest. The Dancers surrounded us and touched us lightly. I clutched my hands into fists, fighting the feeling of being trapped. Latona held her head back, eyes closed, and I did the same. Fingers with skin like soft rubber touched my mouth, my nose, my eyelids. I didn't move. The Dancers smelled of cinnamon and something tangy, something I couldn't identify. The bumps on my scalp burned as

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the Dancers touched them. I wanted to move my head away, but I didn't.

I heard whistling and low hums. The sounds seemed to follow a pattern, and felt, after a moment, as familiar as a bird's call. I opened my eyes. Latona had stepped away from the Dancers a little. She was gesturing and churring. One of the Dancers touched her face and then whistled three times, in short bursts.

"He said they would be pleased to have you visit their homes."

I pulled away from the Dancers near me. Even though they were no longer touching me, I could still feel their rubbery fingers against my skin. I glanced at Latona and then at the Dancers again. They had no visible, recognizable sexual characteristics. I wondered how she knew the speaker's gender. "Thank him."

She did. We walked with the single Dancer through the canopied trees. My heartbeat slowed. I could feel myself growing calmer. If the Dancers were going to hurt us, they would have done so when we met them at the edge of the forest. Perhaps. I was assigning human logic. I shook my head and tried to clear my mind.

The vegetation grew thicker and the air cooler as we hit areas without sunlight. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I saw clothlike material stretched around four trees like handmade tents. The Dancer continued talking, touching things as if he were giving us a tour. Latona did not translate.

We followed him inside one of the tents. There the tangy cinnamon scent was stronger. I touched the tent material, and it felt like water-proof canvas. Rugs made from leaves covered the ground, and in the corners sat glass jars that cast a phosphorescent glow around the room.

"He says he would like to welcome us to his home."

"Tell him we're honored."

She responded. I examined the glass jars. They were crude. The glass had bubbles, ripples, and waves. The light inside moved as if it were caused by something living.

Our host whistled and churred. Latona watched me. "What is he saying?" I asked.

She glanced at the Dancer as if she hadn't heard him. Then she smiled. "Right now he's saying that if he were a good host, he would give you a jar, but the jars are valuable, too valuable to give to a guest who will disappear before the day ends."

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"Tell him that I plan to return—"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter." She slipped out of the tent. "You need to see the rest of the homes."

I followed her into the shaded darkness of outside. "Shouldn't you thank him?"

"No." She led me toward more of the tentlike structures. Dancers emerged, hands reaching for our faces. Latona ducked this time. I did, too. I was a bit more at ease, but I didn't want them to touch me again.

From appearances, the Dancers seemed to be a hunter-gatherer culture. The entire area lacked permanence. The ground seemed untended and wild. I saw no signs of cultivation. But then, I didn't know what I was looking for. For all I knew, the canopied trees were an edible, renewable resource.

"This is it," Latona said.

I stared at the tents, the scattered possessions, the Dancers huddled around me like shadows in the late-afternoon sunlight. "Which ones are the children?"

"The children live elsewhere. Let me ask permission to see them." Latona turned to a Dancer beside her and spoke. The Dancer whistled and churred in response, gesturing at me. Latona nodded once, and then the Dancer walked forward. "Come on," Latona said.

I followed. The hard-packed mud curved inward, as if feet had worn a smooth path through the trees. There were no tents here, and the vegetation had grown lush. I realized then that the land behind us had been tended, that the Dancers did the opposite of the colonists. The Dancers removed vegetation except for the thin, spindly trees.

Sunlight began to break through the overhead canopy. We reached a sun-mottled area where the undergrowth had again been thinned. Here the canvas material had been tied to the trees sideways to form a gate. We approached the gate and stared over the edge. Inside, small, dark creatures scrabbled in the dirt, tussling and fighting. Some sat off to the sides, leaning on the gate — sleeping, perhaps. Toward the back, larger children lay on the ground, their skin gray in the filtered sunlight. Their fingers seemed clawlike, and their eyes were dark, empty, and hollow.

I nodded toward the children. "Are they ill?"

"No," Latona said. "They've hit puberty."

"Do these children ever interact with the adults?"

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"Not really. The adults treat them like animals. Education into the life of a Dancer begins after puberty."

I shivered a little, wondering at life that began in a cage under a harsh sun. The gray-skinned children did not move, but lay in the sunlight as if they were dead.

The Dancer churred and hovered over us. I glanced at it. Latona spoke briefly, then said to me, "We have to leave."

The Dancer corralled us, as if pushing us away from the children. Latona took my arm and led me in a different direction. The Dancer watched from behind.

"This is a quicker way back to the dome," Latona said. Some of the cream had melted off her face, making her appear lopsided and slightly alien.

The gray-skinned, sickly-looking creatures with the clawed hands haunted me. "You never told me why you brought the children here."

"I wanted them to learn respect for the Dancers." Latona kept her head down. We moved out of the trees.

"Why? The arrangement seems to be working."

"They're living beings," Latona snapped. "Humans have a history of mistreating beings they don't understand."

"And you think the colonists are mistreating the Dancers."

"Yes." Latona pushed a ropy branch aside and stepped into a patch of sunlight. Her sand scarf glowed white. "But I don't know what the Dancers think."

"That's why the Alliance is here, to find out what the Dancers think?"

"And to negotiate an agreement over the Salt Juice herbs."

I frowned. I stepped into the sun, and the heat prickled along my back. "But there is no agreement."

"You can't negotiate with the Dancers," she said. "They have an instinctual memory, and a memory for patterns that allows them to learn language and establish routines. Past events have no meaning for them, only future events that they hold in their minds. It poses an interesting problem: if we negotiate a treaty with them, the treaty will not exist, because they will have forgotten it. If we plan to negotiate a treaty in the future, as their language and customs allow, the treaty will not exist because the negotiations haven't started yet."

"Their language has no past tense?"

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"Not even a subtle past. They speak only in present and future tenses. They also have a very active subjunctive. Their lives are very fluid and very emotional."

"And when one of them dies?"

"He ceases to be." She glanced at me, her lips set in a thin line. "And then they skin the body, eat the flesh, throw the bones to the children, and cure the skin. They stretch it and mount it until it becomes firm. And then they use it to form their tents."

I knew then what was glowing at me through the jars in the tents. Silver eyes. Wide silver eyes that had absorbed the light from the planet's powerful sun. "Where did the jars come from?"

"The miners made them. The Dancers used to live closer to the salt cliffs."

My mind felt cold and information-heavy. Heat rose in waves from the sand. "What did the children think of the Dancer children?"

Latona shrugged. She took out the cream and reapplied it. "They seemed fascinated. Who knows what would have happened? Netta banned any child contact with the Dancers."

"Before the murders?"

"Yes." Latona handed me the cream. "I am not supposed to bring them back."

I nodded, done asking questions. I drank the water Latona gave me, then looked across the desert. The dome looked small and far away. I wrapped my scarf around my face and followed Latona, too tired to do anything other than walk.

VII

LATONA PROMISED to show me a time-lapse holo of the Dancers' puberty rite. I eased my way out of the apartment the next morning, unable to comb my hair because some of the bumps had burst, leaking pus on my scalp. My skin, which had been a light red the night before, had eased into an even lighter tan. It would take many hours wearing reflective cream under the sun before my skin color even approached that of Netta or Latona.

I had barely missed the morning work rush. I walked along the pathway, staring at yards and the windowless plastic homes. These people

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made the most euphoric drug in the galaxy, and they were humorless stay-at-homes who created beautiful yards, but refused to look at their handiwork from inside the house.

The yards had different flowering plants from different climates and different seasons. Roses seemed to be predominant, but some blocks preferred rhododendrons, while others had hyacinths. All of the flowers bloomed, too, the tulips with the pansies, the daisies with the sunflowers. It seemed odd to me that a colony with such botanical expertise could not learn to grow native herbs from seeds.

Children's laughter caught me again, near the same block it had before. I glanced down. The children were playing in their park, sitting in a circle, pounding their fists against the ground. I walked over slowly, hoping that this time they would talk to me. Michael Dengler sat in the middle of the group, smiling as if he had found his own personal heaven. I relaxed a little. Maybe my advice had helped him. Maybe my wasted ten years had helped someone.

One of the boys pointed at me. The children got up and backed away, as if I were an enemy; then, as a group, they turned and ran.

I stopped and watched them go. Only one child glanced back as he ran. Michael Dengler. I waved at him. He didn't wave back.

I continued to the offices of the Extra-Species Alliance. A woman sat at the desk. She was petite, with close-cropped hair and wide eyes. "Latona couldn't be here," she said, "but she told me to show you the holo, and she said she'd answer any of your questions this afternoon."

I nodded, and followed the woman into another closet-sized room with a holojecter set up. She flicked on the 'jecter, flicked off the lights, and left me.

Dancers filled the room, less frightening without their tangy cinnamon scent. They circled around a gray-skinned child, huddled on the desert floor. The circling seemed to last forever, then a Dancer grabbed a ceremonial knife and slit open the breastbone, reached and removed something small, blackened, and round. A heart, I assumed. The Dancer handed the black object to another Dancer, who set it in a jar. Then the Dancer slit again, removing two thin, shriveled bits of flesh from the child's interior. The child didn't move. Another Dancer put the flesh into a jar beside the heart. Finally the first Dancer lifted the child's hands by a single finger and sliced once along the wrists. The hands fell off, and the

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child's arms fell to its side. The Dancers carried the child to a tree and leaned the child against the tree. They wrapped the child's chest with rope leaves, and as they placed the arms on the child's lap, I could see small fingers peeking out of the hollow wrists like human hands hidden in the sleeves of a jacket one size too big.

The Dancer child did not bleed. Latona's comparison to a human child losing its baby teeth was an apt one.

Then the time-lapse became clear. The child's hands grew; its skin grew dark like that of other Dancers. Gradually, it moved on its own, and the adult Dancers helped it crawl into a nearby tent. Then the holo ended.

I replayed it three times, memorizing each action, and confirming that there was no blood.

Things weren't adding up: things Latona said, things I had seen. I shut off the 'jecter and left the room, thankful that the woman was not at the front desk. I needed to read my briefing packet, to see if the information in there differed from the information Latona had given me about the Dancers.

I hurried back to my apartment and sat in the front room reading. Latona was right. The Dancers showed no ability to remember things from visit to visit or even within visits. During the murders by the miners, the Dancers returned to the sites of the deaths and continued to interact with the miners as if nothing had happened. They never tried retaliation, and they never mutilated any of the miners.

Dancer preadolescents were gray and motionless, looking more dead than alive. The human children Latona had taken to the Dancers were fluid and energetic, as lively as the little creatures I had seen scrabbling in the dirt.

I set aside the packet, not liking what I was thinking. The Dancers were a protected species, so they could not be killed or relocated without interference from Lina Base. The colonists were great botanists and had been trying for years to learn the way to grow the Salt Juice herbs. The Dancers were impossible to negotiate with, and they guarded the seeds jealously. What if a colonist had figured out how to grow an herb from seed? The Dancers were no longer necessary; were, in fact, a hindrance. The murders allowed Lina Base to send in one expert instead of a gaggle of people — and also put the expert on a strict timetable. Netta had requested an expert with a flawed background, known for his rash judgments. My

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impetuous decision making had led one colony to spray an alkaline solution in an acidic ocean filled with intelligent life. Perhaps this colony wanted me to make another bad decision, and use that as an excuse to murder the rest of the Dancers.

I leaned my head on the back of the chair. I had no evidence supporting my theory, had only suspicions as I had had with the Minarans. I stood up. I had to go to Communications Central and wire for more help. I could not make my decision alone.

VIII

A knock on the door startled me out of a sound sleep. I was lying on the packet on the couch in the apartment's front room. The knock echoed again. It sounded loud in the nearly empty room. Before I could respond, the door eased open and spread a wide patch of yellow light across the floor.

"Dr. Schafer?"

I squinted, and sat up, reaching for a light. As the lights came on, I closed my eyes, wincing even more. "Yes?"

"We have another one."

I blinked. My eyes finally adjusted to the brightness. D. Marvin Tanner, the head of the dome's security, stood before me. He seemed calm. "Another one?"

"Yes," he said. "Netta sent me to get you. We have another dead child."

The flat tone he used to deliver those words sent a shiver down my back. The security officer on Minar had come to me in the middle of the night, his hands shaking, his mouth set in a rigid line. His voice would crack as he spoke of the dead and his own feelings of helplessness. Tanner didn't seem to care. Perhaps that was because this was no longer his investigation. Or perhaps he was one of those borderline psychopaths himself, the kind that went into law enforcement because it provided them with a legal way of abusing others.

I wondered how he was able to get into the apartment so easily. Netta had assured me that I had the only key to the lock.

"What happened?" I rubbed my face, adjusted my clothes.

"You'll be able to see," he said. "No one is allowed to work the scene until the entire team has been assembled."

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I got up and followed Tanner outside. The dome filter had changed again, this time to one that left everything looking gray and grainy, probably the colony's equivalent of dawn. Shadows seemed darker, and the dome filter leached the color from the plants. Only the white plastic seemed unchanged, but startling for the contrast against the physical environment.

People had stepped to the edges of their gardens and were watching us pass. The street seemed unusually quiet. I waited for someone to say something or to follow us. No one did. They stared as if we were a two-man funeral procession and they were distant relatives there only for the reading of the will.

We turned the corner and arrived at the murder scene. A dozen people stood in a half-circle on the cultivated lawn. Netta and Saunders crouched near the door. I pushed through the people and walked up the sidewalk.

"Netta?"

She turned, saw me, and moved out of the way. This body was headless. I stared for a moment at the gap where the head should have been, noting as calmly as I could that no blood stained the white plastic door. This child was smaller than the others. Its chest had been opened, and its hands were missing.

"You need to see this, too, Justin." She walked down the steps and rounded the building. I followed. There, in between two spindly rosebushes, the head rested. I stared at it, feeling hollow, noting other details while my stomach turned. Michael Dengler's empty eyes stared back at me. His mouth was caught in a cry of pain. His hands were crossed in front of his chin, but I couldn't see his heart or his lungs.

The last time I had seen him, he was smiling, running with the other children. I crouched down beside him, wanting to touch his face, to soothe him, to offer to take his place. My life was empty. His had just been starting.

"Michael Dengler," Netta said, startling me. I took a deep breath. "His sister, Katie, was one of the earlier victims. His mother is over there."

A woman stood at the very edge of the semicircle, her hands clutched to her chest. The silence was unnerving me. I could hear myself breathe. The rose scent was cloying. I turned back to Michael and thought, for a moment, that I was staring at myself.

"This is the first time we have ever found the missing body parts. We

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have to confirm, of course, that the hands are his, but they look small enough," Netta said.

I made myself concentrate on Netta's words. Michael Dengler was dead. I was part of the investigative team. I had to remain calm.

"I need a light," I said. Someone came up behind me and handed me a handlight. I cupped my hand around the metal surface and flicked the switch, running the light around the head. The boy was pale, the pale of a human body that had never, ever tanned. "How old was he?"

"Eight."

Eight. Too young for puberty, even on the outside edges of human physiology. If he had been female, maybe. But even that was doubtful. This was a little boy, a child, with no traces of adulthood — and no possibilities for it. *Mom says they should take me for who I am,* he had said. *What do you think!*

Professional, I reminded myself. I had to be professional. I took a deep breath, stood up, and dusted my knees.

"Someone needs to talk with the mother," Netta said. "I think you're the best choice."

My heart froze. I didn't want to deal with someone else's emotions. I wanted to go back to my apartment, close the door, and cry for the little boy who had lost everything, as I had. I didn't want to talk with his mother, even if I was the best choice because I had been trained in a helping profession. Helping. I made a small, quiet sound. I had never been able to help myself. How could I help a woman who had lost two children by murder in a few months?

"Go on," Netta said. Her words had the effect of a strong push. My movements were jerky as I walked over to Michael's mother.

She was half my height, in her early thirties, her eyes dark and haunted. "Ma'am," I said. "I'm Dr. Schafer."

"He's beyond doctors now." Her voice sounded rusty, as if she hadn't used it for a long time.

"Yes, he is, but you're not. Let me talk with you for a moment."

"Talk?" The word seemed to snap something inside her. "We talked the last time, and talked and talked. I have two more babies, and I want to leave the planet. I wanted to leave before, with those crazy aliens out there, killing and killing. You want my whole family to die!"

Her words echoed in the silence. I didn't want anyone to die, especially

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her son. She pushed away from me and walked to the edge of the steps, staring at what remained of Michael. I watched her for a moment, and could think of nothing to say to comfort her. I wasn't even sure she needed comforting. There was something reassuringly human about her pain.

I was the one who needed to remain calm. My hands were shaking, and the back of my throat was dry. I had missed something in the shock of Michael's death. Something was not making sense. I went to Davis, who was examining the ground near the rosebushes. "Leave the weapon this time?" I asked. The killer had, each time in the past, removed the body parts and left the weapon, a thin flensing knife chipped from native rock. Davis pointed. The knife sat on the other side of the bush, away from Michael's head.

"It's smaller than I thought," I said.

"But powerful." Davis leaned over toward me. "See the edge? It's firm. Anyone could use this knife. If the victim is unconscious, the killer doesn't need much strength."

"Not even to cut through bone?" I shuddered, thinking of Michael screaming as the knife sliced his skin.

Davis shook his head. "It's a Dancer knife. They do this stuff all the time and have had centuries to perfect it. We've had people cut themselves in the lab, nearly losing fingers, just handling the things."

The feeling still bothered me. I glanced around me. The houses were close together, the lawns well tended. How could a Dancer sneak in here, steal a child, and return it in such a grisly condition without anyone seeing? And how could a Dancer get past the dome guards?

I stood up and took a deep breath. I had to get away from the roses. Their rich scent was making me dizzy. And I hated the silence. I pushed past the semicircle out to the street and glanced once more at the scene in front of me.

Poor little Michael Dengler. He had wanted so much to grow up, to be part of the group. I shook my head. At least he had been able to play with them that one last time. At least he had gotten part of his wish.

IX

I leaned against the desk at the office of the Extra-Species Alliance. The cool plastic bit into my palms. Latona stood in front of me, her arms

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crossed in front of her chest. She had contacted me as soon as she heard about Michael Dengler's death.

"Dancers do not behead their children," she said. "I can show you document after document, holo after holo. It's not part of the ritual. A beheading would kill the child. Someone is killing them. Someone human."

A chill ran down my back. She had come to the same conclusion I had. "But the other children died. Perhaps the Dancers thought that the beheadings might work?"

Latona shook her head. "They don't learn as we do. They think instinctually, perform rituals. Beings with rituals and no memory would not experiment. That's not within their capability."

"But couldn't they modify—"

"No." Latona leaned toward me. "Dr. Schafer, they remove the lungs and heart to make way for larger organs. They remove the hands to make way for sexually mature genitals. They mate with their hands. The head remains — their heads are like ours, the center of their being. They can't live without the head, and the Dancers do not kill each other. They never have, not even mercy killings. They had no concept of it."

And when they die, they cease to be. I shivered. "Why would someone kill children like this?"

Latona shook her head. "I don't know. I wish I did. Maybe the children know. Maybe they've seen something strange."

I nodded. The children, of course. If anyone had seen something, the children would have. They were the only ones free during the day. I ducked out of the office. I had to talk to Netta.

X

NETTA'S OFFICE was a small room in the back of Command Central. I had already been to the building once during the past two days — to wire for extra help before Michael Dengler's death. Lina Base had promised me assistance within the week; they had to pull people off of other assignments and shuttle them to us. During that visit, though, I hadn't seen Netta's office. I wasn't prepared for it.

The room smelled of roses. Plants hung from the ceiling and crowded under grow lamps attached to shelves on the far wall. Salt Juice ad posters

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from various nations, bases, and colony planets covered the white wall space.

Netta sat on a large brown chair behind a desk covered with computer equipment and more plants. "You have something to report?"

'No." I had to stand. She had no other chair in her office. "I would like to make a request, though."

She nodded, encouraging me to continue. She looked tired and worn, as if Michael Dengler's death affected her as much as it had affected his mother.

"I would like to interview the older children."

"Why?" Netta sat up, suddenly alert.

"I think they might know something, something the rest of us don't."

She templed her fingers and tapped them against her lips. "You've seen the reports, and the holos, and Latona has taken you to see the Dancers. I'm sure you have enough to make a preliminary recommendation without bothering the children."

"No, actually, I don't." I looked around for a chair or available wall space, anything to lean on to ease my discomfort. "Some things aren't adding up."

"Everything doesn't have to add up for a preliminary ruling," Netta said. "I want quick action on this, Justin. Another child died yesterday. I need to protect my people from these Dancers."

"And what happens if I get an injunction against the Dancers? By intergalactic law, that removes their protected status. Michael Dengler died inside the dome. His killer might not have been native to this planet."

Netta's lips turned white. "I brought you here to make a ruling on the Dancers' motivation, not to solve a crime that has already been solved. Those children died by Dancer methods. I need to know what methods I can use to protect my people from those creatures."

"I want to talk to the children," I said. The office was unusually hot, probably for the plants. "I want office space by tomorrow, and the children brought to me one by one. I'm doing this investigation by the book, Netta."

Her eyes widened a little, and for a moment I felt my suspicions confirmed. Then she reached over and tapped a few lines into the computer. "You'll have a room and a place, and someone will bring the children to you," she said.

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"Thank you," I said. Then I took a deep breath. "You aren't paying the Dancers for the Salt Juice herbs, are you?"

Netta leaned away from the computer, her fingers still touching the screen. "Why?"

"I'm wondering what they'll lose now that you've discovered how to grow your own herbs." My hands were shaking, revealing my nervousness at my guess. I clasped them behind my back.

Netta studied me for a moment, as if she were tempted to find out where I had gotten the information. Her eyes flicked to the left, then down. It seemed as if hundreds of thoughts crossed her mind before she spoke. "We think the seeds have a religious significance for the Dancers. We don't know for sure. We don't know anything about them for certain, despite what the Alliance says."

A curious elation filled me. I had guessed right. The colonists had learned the secret to making Salt Juice. The Dancers were dispensable.

"The Dancers are dangerous, Justin," Netta said. "I don't think you need any more proof of that. I want some action in the next three days on this. I need quick movement."

I nodded, thinking of the team shuttling in. They would arrive soon. Netta would get her movement, although it might not be the kind she wanted.

XI

THE ROOM she gave me to interview the children was the same one in which we had held our initial briefing. It was almost too big and very cold. A table sat in the middle of the room, my chair on one side, a child-sized chair with booster on the other — a setup almost guaranteed to make the child uncomfortable. I made sure the computer took meticulous notes, but the first half a dozen interviews ran together in my mind.

"What is the game you play?" I asked.

"'Race." The boy was tall with dark hair.

"How do you play it?"

"You pound your fist on the ground three times." This time the speaker was a girl, a redhead with sun-dark skin. "After that you either make a fist, lay your hand flat, or put up two fingers. If you do something different from most of the group, you have to imitate something, and

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we have to guess. If we can't guess it, you're out."

"Did the Dancers teach you the game?"

"No." Another little girl, this one with black curly hair.

"What did the Dancers teach you?"

"We only saw them once."

"Why didn't you want Michael Dengler to play?"

The fat boy scrunched up his face. "He was too little."

"But he played with you the last time I saw him."

The blonde girl shrugged. "He followed us around."

I didn't get much information from them, and what information I got was the same, except repeated in different words. By midday I was tired and discouraged. I planned to see only a few more children and then quit, ready to let the team take over when they arrived.

The next child who entered was named Beth. She was tiny for an eleven-year-old, with long black hair, dark eyes, and brownish black skin. She sat stiffly on the chair, ignoring the anatomically correct dolls I had placed beside her, after pausing momentarily to examine the doll that had been altered to represent a Dancer.

I poised a hand over the computer screen, to highlight anything of importance. Such a standard gesture usually made people more comfortable. But nothing seemed to ease these children. And I knew their answers by heart.

"Let's talk a little bit about what's going on," I said.

"I don't know anything," Beth said. Over her soft voice, I heard six other voices murmuring the same thing.

"You'd be surprised what you know."

The others had shrugged. Beth's lower lip trembled. I watched it, trying not to take too much hope from such a small sign.

"I understand you've met the Dancers."

She nodded. "Latona took us."

"What did you think of them?"

"They're kinda spooky, but neat. They grow up fast."

A new response. I tried not to be too eager. "What makes you say that?"

She shrugged. I waited in silence for her to say something. When she did not volunteer any more information, I asked, "How often have you seen the Dancers?"

"Just the once." Back into the rote response. Her eyes were slightly

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glazed, as if she were concentrating on something else.

"Did you know Michael Dengler?"

She looked at me then. Her eyes were stricken, haunted. I had to work to meet her gaze because pain was so deep. "I always played with him when the others weren't around," she said. I nodded once to let her know I was listening and interested. "John and Katie say we aren't supposed to be nice to him because that means he'll keep following us. I told John that Mikey was too little, and John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?"

"No," I said. Her use of the present tense bothered me.

"The Dancers do," she said. "They grow into adults."

My hands had become cold. "Do you want to be an adult, Beth?"

"Not anymore," she whispered.

XII

MY ENTIRE body was shaking as I returned to my apartment, a 'jecter under my arm. I no longer trusted myself after the mistakes with the Minarans. I had to double-check every suspicion, every thought. The remaining children that I interviewed said nothing about the Dancers, nothing about growing up. But Beth's soft voice kept echoing in my head.

John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?

None of them grew, Beth. The experiment failed.

I pulled out the holos and the file. I stared at the 2-D photos, examining the color closely. Then I watched the holos. Katie Dengler's face was as pale as her brother's on the day she left to see the Dancers for the first time. When she died, her skin was as dark as Latona's. All the other children had pale skin in the earlier holo, and dark skin at the time of their death. They had gotten the dark, dark tan from the harsh sun. They had been outside the dome — a lot. My skin, despite its off-planet weakness, had turned only a light brown. The children's skin was almost black. black.

The dome guards were new since the death before Michael Dengler's. The dome doors were easy to use and didn't latch. The children were un-

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supervised except for occasional school days, when workers could be spared to teach. No one watched the children, so the children went off to watch the Dancers.

Do you want to be an adult, Beth?

Not anymore, she whispered.

The Dancers wouldn't remember from time to time, and would show the ritual to the children over and over again. The children could take the knives without the Dancers realizing it. The Dancers' lack of a past probably meant that they lost a lot of things over the years and thought nothing of it.

John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?

"None of them are," I whispered. The old man I had seen before I left, the old man who had lived here as a child, had said he could hardly wait to become an adult because then he could legally leave the planet. Shuttle pilots rarely checked IDs. They figured if a person was large enough to work on any of the nearby bases, they would ferry that person off-planet, away from a colony, away from home.

Away from a sterile place with no windows, lots of rules, and no real place to play.

I shut off the 'jecter and hugged my knees to my chest. Then I sat in the darkness and rocked, as the pieces came together in my mind.

XIII

SOMETIME TOWARD morning I decided to go to Command Central. The building was only a few buildings away from mine. As I walked, I listened to the silence of the community. The dome filter was a thin gray, as it had been the morning of Michael Dengler's death. The colony itself was quiet, with no indication of people waking.

My back muscles were tight, and an ache throbbed in my skull. I lacked the skill, the expertise, and the authority for this case. I had to contact Lina Base, push to get the help here as soon as possible. If my suspicions were right and the children were mutilating each other in an attempt to grow up, then something had to done, quickly. Some of the children, like Beth, were beginning to realize that the experiment didn't

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work. The others, though, the ones who answered me by rote, still believed in what they were doing.

The children must have visited the Dancers daily since Latona took them the first time. Young minds were particularly susceptible to new cultures — and these children must have absorbed the Dancers' beliefs, modified them, and interpreted them a new way. If Dancer children became adults by losing their hands, hearts, and lungs, then human children would, too. Maybe, they must have thought when they carved Michael, human children grew taller if their heads were removed.

John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?

The children experimented, the adults took the bodies away, and the children never knew if the experiments worked. I remembered seeing the children's muscles bulge in play. Perhaps they had participated in Dancer rituals before trying the same ritual on Linette Bisson.

I walked into Central, spoke briefly to the man who monitored the equipment, and then took a private console. Each console was housed in a booth of white plastic, walls so thin that I could shake them apart. I jacked in my private number, sent a signal to Lina Base, and requested that help arrive immediately.

"Good work, Justin."

I turned. Netta stood behind me, her arms crossed, a half-smile on her face. "The tech let me know that you were here."

"I'm sending a private communication," I said. My hands were shaking. Her attitude disturbed me.

"And it's perfect. When they arrive, I'll tell them that you ran into an emergency, you slapped an injunction against the Dancers, and they rose in a frenzy of slaughter. No one will question the fact that you're gone."

I gripped the console. "You've been killing the children?" It didn't make sense; why would she behead Michael Dengler?

Netta shook her head. Her smile grew. "The children gave me a problem when they started killing each other. I solved it — and another one, with your help. There won't be any more killing. And there won't be any more Dancers."

My throat was dry. I stood slowly, bowing my head slightly, playing the docile prisoner. "Where are you going to take me?"

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"I'm not going to take you anywhere," she said. "I think right here will be—"

I pushed past her and leaped out into the main room. Two guards stood behind her, startled at my sudden movement. I ran down the slick plastic floors, past the tech who had betrayed me, and through the open door.

The dome filter was losing its gray. Some of the sunlight peeked through, illuminating the pathway. My heart caught in my throat. I was out of shape, not used to running.

Damn her. Damn her for using me. For using all of us. The children killed each other in a misguided attempt to imitate the Dancers, and she let the deaths occur. Then she discovered me, with my flaws and my history, and the loophole in galactic law that allowed one person to make a decision for an entire species. She manipulated us all, and in that manipulating, she caused the deaths of more children, including Michael Dengler.

Michael Dengler. His wistful face rose in my mind. Netta would act before the shuttle came. I had to stop her.

I ran through the twisting streets until I reached the offices of the Extra-Species Alliance. I pounded on the door. Daniel opened it. He seemed sleep-weary. I pushed past him. The computer screen on the main desk was blinking. "I'm looking for Latona," I said.

She stood at one of the side doors, her long hair flowing around her. "A message about you just came across the net. Netta says you have decided that the children are killing each other in an imitation Dancer ritual, and you believe all of the children under the dome should die."

So Netta knew how close I had been to the truth. She must have been monitoring me. "Netta's trying to figure out a way to stop me. I radioed Lina Base for help."

"I'm not going to help you kill children," Latona said.

"I'm not trying to hurt the children. I'm trying to save your Dancers."

"The Dancers?"

"Listen," I said, "I don't have time. I need someone who can talk with the Dancers. We need to get them out of here."

"Why would Netta want to hurt the Dancers?"

"Salt Juice," I said. "She doesn't need them anymore. You got me on this track when we talked about Michael Dengler. There is a human killer, which means someone is trying to pin this whole thing on the Dancers." I

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decided the entire truth was too complicated to explain at the moment.

"But Netta—"

"I don't think Netta is working alone."

"She's not." The voice came from behind me. Daniel still stood in the doorway. He stepped into the front rooms. His hands were empty. "Some of the dome leaders have been trying to cancel our contracts here. The negotiations have grown too cumbersome. They want to harvest their own Salt Juice plants, but the Dancers won't let them near the plant site. And even though the colonists know how to grow from seed, they still need the atmospheric conditions and the special soil of the Dancer lands."

Latona whirled. "You never said anything about canceled contracts."

Daniel shrugged. "I was working with it. So was Lina Base. It would have worried you and interfered with your work."

"Shit." Latona grabbed her sand scarf and a small hand-held heat weapon. "Will you stay here, Daniel, stall them?"

He nodded. "I'll also contact Lina Base and tell them we need emergency personnel now."

"They know," I said. "Netta plans to use that as an excuse to make up some story, something about an emergency that required the colonists to kill the Dancers — with my permission."

"O.K.," Daniel said. "I'll make my message explicit. Colonists trying to illegally kill Dancers. Need emergency assistance. Good enough?"

"If the assistance arrives in time," Latona said. "Come on, Dr. Schafer."

I followed her outside. "They flashed that message. I won't be able to get out," I said.

"There're other ways out of the dome." Latona hurried to the dome edge and touched a seam. A small panel slid back, and bright sunshine eased in. If the children had wanted to avoid the doors, they could have used these panels. "You don't have a sand scarf," she said.

"We don't have time to get one. Let's go."

We slid through the dome opening and into the light. The heat was searing. I felt it burn into my skin. Latona threw me her cream, and I rubbed it on as we ran. I wondered if this was the way the children went when they went to study the Dancers. I would ask Latona sometime.

It seemed to take forever to cross the hot sand. Finally we reached the canopied trees. When we did, Latona let out a long, shrill whistle. My skin

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was crackling and dry. I already saw heat blisters forming beneath the surface.

The Dancers appeared, hurrying through the trees. Latona stepped back as they tried to touch her. She spoke rapidly. One of the Dancers spoke back, gesturing with its hands. She shook her head and tried again. The Dancer repeated the gesture.

"What?" I asked.

"I've told them to leave," she said. "They think it's a ploy to get the plants."

I peered through the canopied trees. I thought I saw air cars shimmering in the distance. Perhaps it was my own overactive imagination. I thought they didn't have air cars here. We had to do something. We had to get the Dancers out of the area, if only for a short time. The shuttles would arrive within a few days. The Dancers needed that much of an advantage. "Give me your weapon," I said.

"Why?"

"Have them show us the plants."

"But—"

"Now! I think we've been followed out of the dome."

She spoke to the Dancer. The Dancer churred in response, then grabbed Latona and pulled her through the trees. We walked the path we had walked before, the one that led to the children's pen.

"The plants are all around us," Latona said.

"Give me your weapon," I repeated.

"What do you want to do with it?"

"I want to start these plants on fire, to show the Dancers how unimportant they are."

"But the children—"

"There'll be time to get the children out of the gates."

She bit her lower lip.

"If you're worried, tell him what we're going to do. Have him send people to the children."

She spoke to the Dancer. The Dancer made a whirring sound. Latona reached down and touched a plant with the weapon, searing the leaves. The Dancer whistled shrilly, and others ran down the path.

"Tell him that we're not bluffing. Tell him that we have to destroy the plants, and that they have to leave. I don't care what reasons you give them. Just get them out of here."

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Latona spoke quickly. The Dancer listened, then repeated Latona's sounds loudly. My ears felt as if they were being pierced. I grabbed the weapon from Latona, studied it for a moment, saw the finger control on the side and the open mouth along another side. I pointed the mouth at the plants and pushed the control. Heat whooshed out of the mouth, catching the leaves and sending fire along the plants. The Dancer beside us screamed and ran down the path. Other Dancers were running, too, like the shadows of animals running before a forest fire. In the distance I saw the Dancers lifting the children from the gate and tucking them under one arm as they continued to run.

The heat was getting under my skin, making my body ache. The smoke felt faintly sweet. I giggled, feeling giddy. The canopy was keeping the smoke in the forest. We would pass out if we didn't get out. I grabbed Latona's arm and pulled her with me.

When we reached the desert, I saw no air cars. Hallucination, then, maybe. But I did see a small band of people in sand scarves, walking determinedly across the sand. I remembered watching other colonists walk like that, carrying laser weapons to beaches that lined their island home, and blasting small, seallike creatures until clear blood coated the

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sand, while helicopters circled overhead dropping alkaline solution into the acidic ocean. I sank down against a tree. My whole body itched. I didn't want to watch again.

Latona slipped away from my side. The smoke smell had grown cloying, and the giddiness had grown with it. I wondered where I could stay until the ship arrived. I glanced down at my skin. It was black. Large lumps had risen on the surface, with pus bubbles on top. They would be painful when they burst.

"They're gone," Latona said.

I looked at her, then at the colonists. They weren't gone. They were getting closer.

"The Dancers," she said. "They're gone."

I felt the relief run through me like a cool draft of air. I took a keep breath to speak, and toppled face forward into the sunbaked sand.

XIV

Now I lie here in this cool bed on Lina Base, my body coated with

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burn creams and wrapped in light bandages in the areas where the skin grafts have yet to take.

The rooms here have yellow walls. Green plants hang in the corners, and windows look out onto a wide and vast galaxy. Latona has visited me. She tells me the Dancers have moved to a similar canopied forest, near the Salt Cliffs, the place historians believe was their earlier home. Lina Base is dismantling the colony on Bountiful. Netta and the dome leaders are going to stand trial. I will have to testify at that. Latona also says that some chemists here on Lina Base are trying to duplicate the chemical properties of Salt Juice. I hope, if only for the Dancers' sake, that they have some success.

So I lie here in the coolness, my burns itching and rubbing me raw, and think, Dancer-like, about what is ahead. I have regained my stature, atoned for my culpability in the minds of others, I guess. The Minarans no longer visit me in dreams, but the children do, particularly Michael Dengler.

When I am well, I am to work with the children to determine their mental state. The psychologists here share my fear: that the children have learned Dancer behavior, that it is normal to them. That presents a sticky point of law. We have to determine if the children are insane or are capable of standing trial. And if they are capable of standing trial, what standards do we use, ours or the Dancers? The irony hasn't missed me, since I had gone to determine if the Dancers were mentally capable of standing trial in our system.

I spent all those years after Minar, trying to regain the respect of my colleagues, trying to regain my own self-respect. And now I think of writing papers about the children, about my experience, as if that ten-year period never happened. My colleagues have become friendly again. They call me "Justin"; they send me cards; they wish me well. I seem to have vindicated myself, to have won acceptance with the group.

But sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and see Michael's face, his mouth forming a startled *O*. Michael's group accepted him, and took in payment his head, his heart, his lungs, his hands, and his life.

I smile at my colleagues when they visit. I thank them for their attentiveness and their interest.

And I wait for the flash of a knife, for the bite of an extra-sharp blade against my wrist.

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"Coming Attractions" from page 162

Freak." Rerun Roy sells an illegal drug out of his camper, making a lucrative living as he travels from parking lot to parking lot, until he meets the Freak, a serial killer who threatens Roy's very existence. Suspenseful and thought-provoking, this is one of the best stories of the year.

This issue features the off-beat, with a marvelous countrified story by **Paul Di Filippo**. In "The Grange," a man learns that there is more to country life than meets the eye. **Jane Yolen** provides a nice piece of whimsy with her story, "Dear Ms. Lonelylegs."

And finally, for horror fans, **Sheri Tepper's** "The Gourmet" tracks a woman as she camps in an out-of-the-way graveyard in the Southwest. News on the radio warns of unusual killings in the area — and, lucky woman, she gets to meet the killer. Thrills, chills, and Tepper's wry humor — a wonderful combination.

We can promise you these stories and many, many more. This year's anniversary issue will be something the field talks about for a long, long time. The October/November issue goes on sale August 27.

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Coming Attractions

OUR FORTY-Second Anniversary issue will be something extra-special. We're combining our October and November issues into one large issue — which, at 240 pages, will be the biggest issue of original fiction we've ever published.

The anniversary issue is a grab-bag of marvelous fiction. It includes wizards of all kinds, starting with the familiar Merlin and ending with water wizards who practice in a heat-baked future. Murderers will also make an appearance — some who use chemicals to assist in their dastardly acts, and some who continue long after death. And horror stories featuring nice (dead) cannibals and creepy things on the stairs.

Our spectacular cover story by new writer **Carolyn Ives Gilman** is a wonderful fantasy tale about two women who square off to become the leaders of their tribe. They must make a unique honey — and they may kill themselves or others — in doing so. "The Honeycrafters" is one of the strongest fantasies I've read in a long, long time.

Multiple award winner — and this year's Hugo contender — **Mike Resnick** also makes an appearance with the stunning "Winter Solstice." "Winter Solstice" is a tale about Merlin as you have never seen him. Mike suceeds in adding a new and thoughtful insight to the Arthurian saga.

Lest you think the entire issue is filled with fantasy, just wait until you read **Marc Laidlaw's** post-holocaust science fiction story, "Gasoline Lake," which is set in a future where the world has dried up and water is as precious as gold. "Gasoline Lake" is about a small Oregon town located near a lake that burns. A mystery man arrives who not only refuses to recycle his own bodily fluids, he also can raise the dehydrated dead. An off-beat, creepy science fiction story as only Laidlaw can write.

As an antidote to Laidlaw's overheated world, we'll feature a new story by the talented **Ray Aldridge**. "Wine Dark" is a dark fantasy about a man, a boat, and the mysteries of the wine dark sea.

Popular writer **Bradley Denton** also returns to these pages with a near-future science fiction story called "Rerun Roy, Donna, and the

(to page 161)

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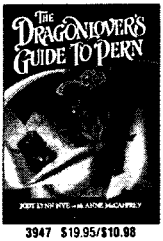

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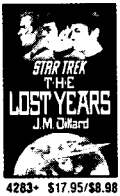

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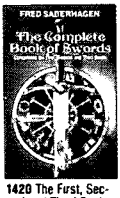

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